Crystal Clarity

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Summary

The official @blueswapuniverse fanfiction. Visit it for comics by the talented cnv99 and other information.

https://blueswapuniverse.tumblr.com

The terrible leader of the Crystal Gem Rebellion, Rose Quartz, shattered Pink Diamond.

Millenia later, Blue Diamond still feels the painful sting of that horrible loss.

On one of her routine mourning trips, she meets Mister Universe, and falls in love.

Their relationship bore fruit in the form of a son, Steven.

Now he must learn to master his powers, learn about his heritage, and keep Cookie Cats from disappearing.
Steven Diamond Universe was a cheerful boy and the son of the now late Blue Diamond. Yet on days like this, as he gazed out the window of the van at the gray sky, he couldn't help but feel unsure.

As if the dreary atmosphere wasn't enough to bring him down, he was in a place unfamiliar to him, in the process of moving to an even more obscure town.

“Why do we have to move here?” he asked neutrally. The boy didn't want to seem negative, after all.

His father glanced at the rear view mirror, meeting with his son’s strong blue eyes briefly through their reflections. His pupils were shaped like diamonds, just as his mother had.

“We’ve been over this.” he patiently told his young son. “It was just time for a little change.” Greg supposed, adjusting his firm grip on the dark steering wheel. “You'll like Beach City, I'm sure of it.”

“Oh, I'm not worried about that!” the boy assured. “As long as I've got you and Pearl, I'll always be happy.”

“Ah.” Greg said. “I guess the clouds have got you down a little bit, then. Well, Pearl assured me that the forecast is supposed to be sunny.”

“I'm glad she went ahead.” Steven beamed, twisting his fingers into his curly mess of hair. “Pearl always has good opinions.”

“When you ask.” Greg dryly remarked. “I like this town. I've only been here once, but it was the beginning of my entire career!”

“Yup.” the boy laughed. “Only one person came to your show!”

He rubbed the back of his balding head, blushing slightly. “Yeah. But that one person gave me the confidence to go to Empire City and make a name for myself. Want to know something funny?”

Steven nodded excitedly, leaning forward onto the passenger seat. “I do!”

“I don't even know her name!” Greg chuckled.

The boy giggled, gazing out of the now smudged window. He could see the town up ahead, and because the sky was clearing up, the sparkling ocean waters.

Most notably was a large plateau with a lighthouse atop it that seemed to have randomly sprouted upward from the far end of the peninsula.

“Beach City.” he breathed, adjusting his loose navy blue shirt with a yellow star emblazoned on it's center. “It's really different from Korea and the flowers.”

“Yup. It may be called a City, but it really doesn't look like one.”

“It not like Seoul or anything at all!” he exclaimed, observing the residential homes.

Greg chuckled at his seven year old son’s naïveté. Leave it to Steven to compare the largest city in
South Korea to a small ocean town.

They finally reached the city limits, but Greg did not continue toward the buildings. He began driving off the road, through a field of shin length grass.

The father noticed his son’s baffled look. “You surprised we aren’t going to the town, Schtu-ball?”

Steven nodded, mouth agape. “I thought we were moving to Beach City, not a field!”

Greg pointed ahead with one hand, keeping the other steadying the steering wheel. “See that? Pearl and the house.”

Steven spotted the former, with her blue back turned to them. Pearl seemed to be lost in thought, gazing onto the vast ocean.

The latter was a gigantic blue crystalline structure, a former palanquin. A divider was placed horizontally in the middle, separating it into two floors. The upper level was a bedroom. A kitchen and bathroom occupied the ground floor.

“Welcome to our new home!” Greg exclaimed, turning back to look at his son. “Well, the new place we parked the house.”

“We moved from one field to another.” the boy realized wistfully.

He smiled, unlocking the van. Father and son stepped out of the van, making the walk up to pearl.

Her short baby blue hair obscured her eyes. She was wearing a leotard with a sheer skirt, something that a human would find uncomfortable wearing in the chilly weather.

Pearl was not a human at all, so it didn’t bother her.

Steven stood next to his father and smiled innocently.

“Pearl.” the man acknowledged.

He guessed she must’ve deep in thought to not notice the van pull up.

At first, she tilted her head to see who had called her name. “Hello, Greg.” she greeted in her whisper of a voice. She turned fully toward them, clasping her hands.

Then she took notice of the boy standing next to the balding man. Pearl bowed respectfully, dropping her head parallel to the ground with her arms outstretched daintily.

“My Diamond.” she reverently said.

Steven couldn't help but smile toothily, showing off his missing baby teeth. They hadn't seen each other in almost a week.

It greatly entertained him when she treated him like royalty. Everything he had ever heard about mother figures suggested the opposite was common.

Greg pursed his lips, knit his brow, and rubbed the back of his head in discomfort. “Pearl… we’ve talked about this. Blue and I agreed to call him Steven. He’s not…”

Pearl stood tall, hands still clasped. Because it was nearly impossible to see her facial features through her hair, combined with the fact that her voice was barely a whisper, it was difficult to
determine what she was thinking.

“Oh. Yes…” she absentmindedly whispered.

Greg nodded. “Yeah. That’s alright.”

The man smirked and glanced at Pearl, changing the touchy subject. “Anyway, Steven wanted to see-”

“Is it finished, Pearl!? Is it?” Steven excitedly queried, practically bouncing up and down.

“Almost.” Pearl politely replied.

He nodded. “Can I see?”

“Sure.” Pearl answered.

The father watched as his son ran away from him. “Be careful!” he warned.

“I will!” Stevens assured excitedly.

“Pearl, I want to thank you for this.” Greg smiled understandingly. “I know it's been a hard couple of years. For all of us.” He rubbed the back of his head, staring at the lush grass. “Especially with Blue gone.” He shook his head, focusing his thoughts. “What I'm trying to say is… We're glad you stayed.”

The pearl nodded curtly. She couldn't help but surrender to the slight smile that crept upon her face. “It's what my Diamond would have wanted.”

He glanced at his cheerful son, taking on a sympathetic expression. “Is it… what you want?”

She thought so.

Pearl wasn't very vocal at all. It simply wasn't in her nature. Her responses and requests were equally brief, to the point, and quiet.

She was glad for her hair, as she was currently fighting back tears. However it was her ever so slightly quivering smile that answered Greg's question.

The man got the impression that something more was going on, and that he and pearl would need to speak with one another.

“Pearl! It’s beautiful! Dad, look!” Steven exclaimed, peering into their home. He craned his head back toward his guardians.

So she finally sniffled, nodding while biting her lip. “I think so.” Pearl muttered.

“How are you crying?” Steven asked with genuine worry in his voice.

Pearl shook her head once left and twice right. “No, my- Steven.”

The boy pursed his lips, lowering his brow to appear as an incredibly concerned pudgy seven year old. “Is that the truth?” he cheekily asked.

She ignored him, moving to the makeshift curtain door of their renovated palanquin house. In this case, Steven found her silence to be deafening.
Greg rubbed the back of his head, following the blue Pearl. “Uh, how was the fly over?”

“Agreeable.” Pearl said in a whisper. “I wasn't expecting you here so soon. Forgive me. I haven't unpacked yet.”

“No worries. We'll give you a hand.” the man cheerfully assured her, winking.

Even after the decade she had lived on earth, it still took getting used to that most every human considered themselves equal to any other human. She saw through the lie.

Even if they didn't want to admit it, humans still prejudiced one another for silly reasons and delegated less desirable jobs to the lower class. Those with the loudest voices were convinced that such ideas were left behind when ‘modern’ civilization came into existence.

At its core, human society was simply lying about not being similar to the Gem Empire. The only difference between the two were the longevity of the gem race, and that Gems were made for a specific purposes.

Humans were more or less able to choose what they wanted to do, even if it was poorly. But in the end, most everyone fit a purpose.

Pearl almost was amused by the lies humanity had been telling itself, but she was much too reserved to be smug. She would use the excuse that she was a Diamond’s pearl, but she knew of a series of particularly sassy Pearls belonging to a certain Yellow Diamond.

They were the highest of the low class.

Some pearls were not as well behaved. It was a mockery of the Great Diamond Authority.

Yellow Diamond's current pearl was not the first.

They entered, seeing the familiar sitting area to the left, and the kitchen to the right. A ladder to the upper floor bedroom rested in the middle of the back wall, attached to a massive throne. Mountains of boxes were scattered around the room, fastened down to avoid breakage during the flight.

So they moved around the blue room, unpacking labeled cardboard boxes. The most difficult to open containers were those sealed by the boy. His taping skill was shoddy and used excess tape.

His labels were a testament to his creativity and positivity. Nearly each word was written in sloppy bubble letters with stars flanking either side.

Clearly he had practiced drawing stars similar so the one on his shirt because every single one was perfectly proportioned.

Greg eventually got to a box labeled ‘blue’ next to their lint covered cream colored couch. The letters were neatly written. In fact, he at first mistook them for a printed Garamond font. Then he realized it was written by the pearl that was currently unpacking green and red ceramic plates.

The man carefully opened it. His heart raced as he did. Was this a box of lost memories? Did ‘Blue’ refer to the love of his life?

“Oh.” he disappointedly said as he was met with the blue zoo animal statuettes that had gone on his mantle previously.

“Dad! Pearl!” Steven exclaimed from the pile of boxes near the door.
Both guardians came over concernedly. “Steven? What's wrong?!” the man exclaimed.

He turned around, holding a framed photo to him. A wide grin was on full display on his chubby face. “Look. I've never seen this before.”

Pearl and Greg both smiled wearily at the sight. Inside the gilded frame was an old photo from nearly ten years prior.

It was of a younger yet bearded Greg throwing his arm around Blue Diamond. They were both smiling, although the Diamond’s was more subtle. Her happiness was better shown in her eyes. They were wide and full of life.

Greg stepped forward, holding the frame in one hand. “Well whaddya know. I thought I lost this a long time ago.”

“Mom is really beautiful in this picture!. I wish you took more.” Steven whined. “This is the first one I've seen where she doesn't look really sad.”

“When I met your mother, she had come to Korea to mourn someone close to her.” he said, his voice dripping with nostalgia. “She would tell you that I was the only one in our relationship to help the other, but she really gave me a hand too.”

Pearl bowed about down by about forty five degrees. “I thank you for that, Greg.”

He rubbed the back of his head with his free hand. “Boy do I miss her.” he stated passionately, with a choke in his voice.

Steven pursed his lips unsurely. “I feel kind of bad, because I never knew her enough to miss her. I just wish I could have met her.”

“She wished the same.” Pearl whispered. “But you both could not exist at the same time.”

His innocent child mind went running. “Do you guys wish I hadn't been born?” he asked with panic in his voice.

Pearl and Greg looked at each other confusedly, their minds rapidly searching for reasons why he would ever come to such a horrifying conclusion.

“Of course not!” Greg assured, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Becoming a father was the best thing that happened to me! And that's coming from the man who dated your mother!”

Pearl pursed her thin blue lips. Steven didn't know what to make of her silence. Finally, she caved in. “Steven, I don't regret that my Diamond had you.”

His smile returned subtly. He was filled with the warmth of familial love. Steven really felt silly for even thinking about thinking such a notion.

Suddenly, his stomach grumbled audibly.

Greg chuckled quietly. “I take it you're hungry? When was the last time we ate?”

“At the Best Diner in the World on the way here from the airport!” the boy realized. “Oh no! We’d better eat or we’ll starve!”

“That was breakfast four hours ago, Steven.” the man pointed out, smiling.
He puffed out his cheeks, blushing. “Well I'm hungry.”

“There are several options on the Boardwalk.” Pearl whispered helpfully. Her hands were clasped in front of her once again. “The food and drink in this country is much… larger.”

“Ah, good old American overconsumption.” the man joked, ruffling his son’s hair. “Let's all go get some lunch. My treat.” Greg winked.

“Good.” Steven giggled. “I don't have money of my own.”

Greg chuckled. “I know, bud. Let's go see what they have.”

Pearl followed them out of the house, walking a meter behind the father and son. “I recall seeing a pizza or seafood restaurant, a ‘fry shack’, and a bakery of some sort. I will just get something to sip, if that is fine, Greg.”

“Of course.” the man assured. Then he turned back and winked. “You can pay me back by helping out at the car wash.”

She tilted her head in confusion. So did the boy.

“A car wash?” Steven asked curiously.

Greg nodded, opening the van door. “I bought an old car wash in town as a source of income.”

Pearl didn't allow it a second thought. Why would she? Cleaning was a primary duty of pearls.

The makeshift family hopped into the Mr. Universe van, fastening their seat belts like responsible people.

Steven did so with a big grin. After all, did little children fasten their own seat belts? Nope, only adults and big kids did. That was something he was trying to assert to his guardians, that he was old enough to begin training.

He had seen his blue guardian in action a few times, gracefully cutting monsters that were attracted to them into ribbons. He envied her skills. When she fought, it didn't appear that she was fighting at all, but performing a deadly dance.

The thought of such a thing caused him to kick his tiny feet back and forth at the seat in front of him.

Pearl cleared her throat quietly.

He sheepishly realized that he had been kicking her seat in his excitement. “Sorry, Pearl.”

“All has been forgiven, my Steven.” she whispered. Pearl didn't like that being polite required so many words.

Greg chuckled at his son’s eagerness. He didn't know exactly what had him so happy. “Easy on the seat, Schtu-ball.”

Everyone was quiet as they drove through the town. The man stopped on the side of the road adjacent to the back of the boardwalk buildings.

Greg, Steven, and especially Pearl got out of the van with no conversation.

Steven excitedly took the lead, running between buildings to the boardwalk, and by extension, the
beach. He gazed at the sparkling water with awe. From the cliff, they hadn’t been able to see the spectacle of the soft sands in front of the water, only the vast ocean itself.

Other than Greg and Pearl following him, the boardwalk was quiet and completely empty. After all, no one wanted to visit an Oceanside town in the middle of the fall.

He turned around with a wide grin on his face. “This is gonna be fun!” he exclaimed, throwing his arms outward.

His guardians smiled happily. Pearl cleared her throat. “Focus.”

“Right!” he said dutifully, putting his hands on his hips. He gazed at the options in front of him.

On the left was Fish Stew Pizza. The smell coming from within was not very appetizing. But pizza was pizza.

Directly in front of them was a building with a counter, resembling a kiosk. The colorful sign read Beach Citywalk Fries. The aroma was tempting, but he wasn't hungry enough for greasy food.

The boy turned his head to the right, spying the most interesting building in town. Where the boardwalk turned into a cement wall, there was a store.

It had a glass storefront, and most prominently, the largest chocolate donut the boy had ever seen on the roof of the building.

He read the name of the store aloud, walking toward it reverently. “The Big Donut…”

“Well, it's not exactly a meal, but if that's what you want, we can get it.” Greg said, rubbing the back of his head.

Steven entered the building with wide eyes. A chime went off as they stepped onward. The confectionary shop was laid out like a convenience store.

To the left was a counter and chairs with a coffee pot that extended to the back wall, where two teenaged humans stood boredly. Their shirts were violet with a donut emblazoned on the middle. The donut had two bite marks in such a way, that it appeared to also read ‘BD’.

On their right was several freezers and refrigerators filled with all manners of frozen treats and sweet drinks. Speaking of drinks, a soft drink machine was also on the right wall.

The teenager with floppy hair waved. “Hello. How can we help you?”

Greg looked up to the various menus above their heads. “We’ll take a dozen donuts.”

The girl with tied up hair moved to the clear shelves of donuts. “What kind?”

Greg looked to his son, who was shyly hiding behind Pearl. Nothing out of the ordinary. As happy as his son was, being around Pearl had certainly built up shyness around strangers.

"Why don't you two get some drinks?” he suggested to the pair.

Steven nodded dutifully. “I think I'll get apple.”

“Six glazed and six chocolate, please.”
He tapped buttons on the register while the girl selected donuts. “That will be eleven dollars and sixty five cents.”

Pearl and Steven came forward, each holding a sixteen ounce plastic bottle. Steven’s was an apple flavored juice, but Pearl’s was more particular. It was a raspberry Sugar Shock Shutdown.

Based on her quiet and reserved temperament, one might deduce she was interested in more… tame drinks. However she loved the flavor of raspberries, and the sensation of fizzing drinks on her blue tongue.

A carbonated, sugary, caffeinated beverage was perfect for someone with her tastes.

Food was a different story. Having partial human parts for the transference of liquids was much different than a disgusting digestive system. Bubbling on her tongue was fine, but not in her stomach that did not exist.

The teenaged boy nodded, ringing up the new total. “Sixteen ninety-five, sir.”

Greg presented him with a twenty dollar bill, receiving three dollars and five cents as change on top of the box of donuts in exchange.

“Thank you very much.” he said. Then he looked to his son. “Steven, what do we say?”

“Um… thank you.” Steven quietly said. He hid behind Pearl’s sheer shirt, peeking to see the teenagers at the counter.

The girl waved as they motioned to leave the shop. “Come back any time!”

The happy trio left the shop with their goods in hand. Pearl lagged behind, carefully untwisting the cap off of her drink.

It opened with a soft hiss, and she took a sip. Pearl let it rest on her tongue as she admired the flavor and tingle.

As they stopped for Steven to tie his sneaker, she turned around. She twisted the cap onto the bottle, observing the town.

In front of Fish Stew Pizza, she could see something on the far end of the beach, near the mountain of a hill at the end of the peninsula. A chain link fence sectioned off that part of the beach.

Pearl raised an eyebrow as to why someone would fence off possibly the shadiest place on the oceanfront. She thought humans liked the shade, because it protected them from their deadly sun.

That was another thing she almost found humorous. The star earth orbited was a double edged sword. It provided life, warmth, light, and food to humans. However, it could also damage their fragile skin and make their cells reproduce uncontrollably in the form of cancers.

An organic life’s greatest ally was also its worst enemy.

Pearl was grateful she did not have to worry about such trivial things as breathing, gravity, and nutrients.

She took another sip of her raspberry Sugar Shock Shutdown.

That was when she saw something she never expected to ever see, especially now.
On top of the hill, next to the lighthouse, was a tall figure in white clothes with a gigantic mess of pink hair. Humans couldn't have bubblegum locks.

If Pearl had a heart, she was sure it would be beating fast enough to pump jet fuel into an airplane.

Her drink traveled upward through her nostrils, causing her eyes to water profusely as her shapeshifted sinuses burned.

She grasped onto Greg and Steven’s t-shirts, darting away back toward the van. Her speed was unmatched by any human on the planet. A testament to her gem heritage.

Greg and the boy both exclaimed as she desperately clawed at the van doors.

The man clapped a hand on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

“Pe-”

“Don't say my name!” she exclaimed in a whispering shriek.

Her blue face and periwinkle hair were stained with red soda. Pearl brushed her bangs out her eyes, displaying her wide, sullen, and incredibly frantic eyes.

They were reminiscent of his mother's in the photos. However her bags were of stress, not just depression.

“Pearl?” Steven asked with genuine concern.

She blinked twice, staring at the boy.

“Rose Quartz.” Pearl shakily sighed. “I thought I saw her.” she lied.

“Who-” Steven started.

“Nobody.” Greg dismissed.

The boy went to open his mouth, but a small part of his mind warned him against it. Usually, his guardians were always open and never hid anything. So he had a feeling he had better not press for details.

Pearl’s frightened and weary expression asserted that fact. It cemented it into his mind.

“May we go back home?” Pearl politely requested, composing herself and ignoring her wet head.

Greg nodded, walking around to the driver’s seat. “We had better. I'm kind of tired from the drive.” was his excuse.

Pearl nodded, agreeing only in her eagerness to leave.

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The servant class gem sat atop the palanquin, gazing upon the earth’s moon.

Clutched in her thin blue fingers was a blanket sized piece of ripped navy blue cloth. It was extremely soft, so she rubbed it against her face, inhaling the flowery fragrance through her scent sponge.
It reminded her of times long past. Of faithful servitude and silent obedience.

This was part of her diamond’s cloak. Blue Diamond had gifted it to the pearl days before her death. She treasured it and protected it more carefully than one would with an ancient painting.

Not even Steven or Greg knew of its existence. As with the Rose Quartz she had believed she had seen, it would stay that way.

She clutched her fingers in slight anger as she thought of Rose Quartz. No other gem had brought her beloved Diamond such grief and such anguish.

Now that her Diamond was gone, she thought she perhaps fully understood exactly what Blue had gone through after losing Pink.

Pearl was glad that she had at least gotten to say goodbye.

Under her calm exterior, she despised the name Rose Quartz.

Frankly, she wished she was wrong and some giant hermit had dyed her hair bubblegum pink.

There was no way Gems on earth could have survived corruption. The mindless beasts that had assaulted them in Korea were proof of that.

So she composed herself, assuring herself that there was nothing to fear.

“Pearl?” Greg concernedly asked from the ground.

Pearl peeked her head over the palanquin’s sloped roof, seeing the nervous looking man.

“Yes, Greg?” she whispered.

He rubbed the back of his head, stepping forward. “Steven’s asleep. Can you come down so we can talk about… today?”

She nodded, leaping down unharmed as a result of her being a gem.

“Forgive me. I thought-”

He shook his head, stopping her. “You were really upset. Are you alright?”

“Rose Quartz holds an especially hateful part of my heart.” she admitted whisperingly. “I also fear her. Or rather, what she used to be. There is no possible way she survived the rebellion.” she assured him, in an attempt to quell his worry. “Before the war, Diamonds were thought to be forever. I only wished my Diamond hadn't discovered that so painfully.”

“I wish we hadn't witnessed it first hand.” he drawled. “I- Thank you for staying, again. I'm surprised you don't hate me, after what I did.”

“Having Steven was her choice.” Pearl reasoned. “I have never questioned my Diamond, and I never will. That being said… I hold respect for you. My Diamond considered you her equal.”

He had difficulty choosing a response. When pearl did talk, her words were carefully considered, polite, and covered mostly any followup question one could ask.

She stood tall, clasping her hands in front of her.
“Well, if ever need someone to talk to… I'm still here.” he quietly said.

Pearl nodded, giving him the response he wanted. She watched as he entered the house, pulling the curtain.

When the servant was certain he was unable to hear her, she leapt up. Landing an incredibly far distance away, she hit the ground running toward the town.

She slinked through the streets, meticulously avoiding streetlights and humans.

It was when she reached the beach that she felt anxiety return to her. She practically floated atop the sand as she approached the chainlink fence near the end of the peninsula.

A ‘keep out’ sign hung from the center, and a wooden and polite ‘please’ was beneath it. It gave her the feeling of deja vu.

Could this be the lair of Rose Quartz? Surely not. She told herself what she wanted to hear, that none of the muddy Crystal Gems had survived.

She leapt over the fence, sneaking and following the rock wall. That was when she realized a statue was carved into the side of the mountain. A particularly large one, at that.

Making sure that she heard no one, she slinked around to the lap of the statue, where a cave was. She brushed the hair out of her face as her eyes went wide, in order to get a better look.

In the center of the cave was a crystalline warp pad. Beyond that was a curious mint colored door.

A star was emblazoned in its center, but that wasn't the strangest thing. A gemstone adorned each point of the star.

Her fears were confirmed as she realized what the gemstone types were. A pearl like herself, a hexagonal cut amethyst, a triangular cut Sapphire, a square cut Ruby, but most chilling of all was a pentagonal Rose Quartz Gem.

Pearl took off running back in the direction she came. It wasn't a moment too soon, as she heard the warp pad activate when she had cleared the Big Donut.

She leapt toward the sky, sailing through the air. Due to her rush, she slammed onto the ground of the grassy cliff their new home rested upon. But she was several hundred meters away.

Pearl scrambled to stand up in the wet grass. While she was disappointed her form was grass-stained and her sheer skirt ripped, she was glad all of her training had paid off.

Learning to run away may seem like something silly, but she had learned firsthand how a good fight or flight reflex paid off.

But a question burned in her mind. Was that door evident of gem presence? She thought most likely.

The real question was whether or not the gems were Crystal.

She thought it prudent to keep this information to herself. Pearl was much too frightened to run away, because it might influence those gems into thinking they were threats.

Perhaps staying put in Beach City was a good idea. Hidden in plain sight, as the humans said.

Her slippers squished in the muddy grass as she approached the palanquin. Despite her inability to
actually become exhausted, she felt fatigued emotionally.

Pearl, because everyone in the house was asleep, unclasped her hands. She relaxed, letting her arms hang as limply as possible. In fact, she even felt rebellious as she slightly slouched.

On their kitchen counter was something that made her smile. Her half empty Sugar Shock Shutdown rested exactly as she had left it.

As she had before, she let the raspberry soda rest on her tongue as she slowly admired the flavor and really let it set in.

A pearl had to relish the little things in life in order to remain sane. Of course she was an incredibly blessed pearl. Not only was she in direct service of a Diamond, she was allowed a great deal of slack. All of this was in the past.

Blue Diamond actually had valued her opinion. She had treated her pearl as a member of her court, an albeit silent one.

Typical pearls were treasured, but also treated as objects rather than Gems. Slang words for pearls included tables, boxes, and toys.

She hadn't experienced such prejudice firsthand, but the gossip of pearls spread silently and quickly.

Something she had come to learn was that despite their loyalty, gems were beings with individual thoughts.

It was… confusing. Pearl felt she really had no opinions, because she was never really allowed to share them with anyone other than blue.

An interrogator gem with mindreading abilities had once remarked to her that pearls had the loudest thoughts, not thinking Gems. This was because the average pearl was left with nothing but their imagination for hours on end as they stood quietly next to their master.

Pearl still considered herself loyal to the Homeworld and the Great Diamond Authority, but she had to admit she had doubts about how their society worked after seeing humanity.

Even Blue Diamond did. How she had wished her Diamond was still with them, so she could have returned to Homeworld after millennia of grief to rise into her leadership position once more with pearl at her side. She would know what to do.

Perhaps Steven could fulfill that role.
Crystal Gems

Chapter by Sergeant Plopp

Chapter Summary

Steven and Pearl encounter the Crystal Gems, a group of thought to be dead rebels.

The periwinkle Pearl silently walked through Beach City. Her footsteps made no sound. A green cloth shopping bag with some sort of inconsolable cartoon egg emblazoned on it was slung over her shoulder.

Inside was several grocery items she had been sent to pick up by her human family. Errands like this were what pearls for, and she felt a strong sense of purpose as she was fulfilling it.

She smiled slightly as she imagined Steven's face when he saw what she had picked up for him at Gergin’s.

The boy’s favorite treat was a form of ice cream sandwich called a Cookie Cat. They were half strawberry and half vanilla, with a set of cat shaped chocolate wafers holding it all together. This was the normal variety, and she was shocked with how many flavors they had.

As much as she liked their tastes, she simply couldn't ‘stomach’ eating. If she were human, she was certain she would be fine with it. However, Pearl was unable to eradicate how she could feel the sludge moving through her lithe body.

This night was moderately warm, so there were a few humans familiar to her milling about the beach. She turned her head to the left, spotting the Big Donut.

Pearl walked inside, eager for the chance to find more Cookie Cats. Nothing had changed in this store since they had moved here save for the employees. Last summer, there had been a change in staff because the two teenagers working here previously had graduated from high school and moved away.

The new donut humans were Lars and Sadie. Their uniforms were the same as the last. Sadie was a short, ‘compact’ human with blonde hair.

Lars and Pearl had similar builds, but hers was more feminine while his was lanky and awkward. He was a rude human that she could not stand. Steven did, for some reason.

“Hey, Pearl.” Sadie greeted familiarly. She knew of Pearl’s quiet shyness, so she took charge of the conversation. “Donuts for Steven?”

“Cookie Cats.” she whispered.

The girl’s face dropped. “Oh geez. They stopped making those. Does he know?”

Pearl shook her head.

Lars snickered. “Couldn't compete with Lion Lickers.”
Sadie pursed her lips, motioning behind Pearl. She followed her finger, spotting the refrigerator they were kept in. “You can just take that home to Steven, if you say hi for me. Corporate wanted us to throw it out anyway.”

Pearl bowed low to show her appreciation.

A normal human would be slightly confused by the gesture, but Sadie knew that Pearl was an odd one. By human standards, at least. Steven was a good boy anyway, so his… mom or whatever had to be trustworthy.

“Thank you for this gift.” she said in a whisper.

The girl smiled, throwing her hand up dismissively. “It's no problem! Steven’s a good kid. You're a good… mom..?”

“...Caretaker. Steven’s mother is deceased.” Pearl revealed sadly. Though her whispering voice made it hard to discern her depressed tone.

“Oh.”

That effectively killed the conversation, even for the punk named Lars. Pearl silently stared at the refrigerator. “May I come back for this? I have more errands to run.”

“Sure.” Lars solemnly said. “Just get it before closing time.”

Pearl nodded, leaving the Big Donut purposefully. As soon as she stepped onto the boardwalk, she heard something horrific.

There was quite a bit of noise coming from the presumed Crystal Gem fortress in the form of inhuman shrieks and clicking.

She approached the fence quietly, anxiety flaring up. She didn't know why she was continuing, as she had no idea what she would do if faced with a Crystal Gem.

That was when a gem slammed into the sand in front of her feet. Her kneecaps quaked as the tall being stood up in front of her. A hot pricking trickle of anxiety spread across her chest.

OxOxO

Steven sat boredly in front of the television, watching Crying Breakfast Friends with his blue cloak draped over his shoulders. He was growing anxious, as pearl was nowhere to be seen.

The sun had just gone down.

She was currently out purchasing snacks for a marathon of movies they were preparing to watch. It was why he was wearing a costume, because these films were adapted from the pearl’s favorite book series. She really like human literature, so he “encouraged” her interests.

Consequently, they appeared similar to the robes his mother had worn. He narrowed his piercing blue eyes at the open window, face plastered with concern.

Pearl was punctual to a fault. Being late, without even telling him was extremely odd behavior for her. Steven loved his guardians very much, and as a result he couldn't help but worry immensely as the minutes ticked by.

Finally he stood up, adjusting his loose clothing. This particular one had a hole cut into it that
incorporated his gemstone into the star emblazoned on his shirt. Pearl had suggested it.

He paced around, hands behind his back. “Pearl’s never late… What if a big gem dinosaur or something ate her?”

So he frantically ran outside of the palanquin, looking down to the town as he ran along the cliff’s edge.

It took him a while due to his height, weight, and sandals, but eventually he reached the threshold of the town. As he raced through Beach City, he gazed all around for his blue mother figure.

“Pearl!” he called out, but it wasn't frantic.

Steven had slowed down to a walk, and he pulled the hood of his cloak up to shield his eyes from the hot sun. He really looked out of place, but he didn't care.

Even if he wasn't looking for his missing guardian, he wouldn't. Loving yourself and being yourself were two things Steven lived by.

He reached the boardwalk, looking up and down it. That was when he spotted Pearl walking toward the weird fence on the beach.

Steven sighed, trudging toward her. Then he heard the shrieking of a monster. His walk slowed down slightly.

All of a sudden, as Pearl approached the chain link fence, a large woman dropped from the sky, causing Pearl to fall down in surprise.

“You are not supposed to be here!” she roared. “Why? Where is Blue Diamond?!”

Her hair was shaped like a cube, and her hips shapely. Steven took off running toward them in a mad dash.

“No answer? I'm sorry this had to happen!”

The large woman reeled back for a powerful strike with her massive gauntlet.

In a display of fight or flight reflexes, the boy shot forward, leaping out of his cloak. He couldn't remember when he had picked it up, but he slashed at the squarish attacker with a crystalline scythe.

The woman attacking pearl must not have expected to have someone intervene. Steven panted, and the visor on her face split diagonally and fell to the ground, revealing three multicolored and very confused eyes.

Pearl curled her mouth in disgust. A fusion?

“Who..?” the woman asked dumbfoundedly, completely ignoring the pearl.

Steven was just as confused as she was.

He watched as her three eyes focused on the blue weapon in his hands. Suddenly her expressive eyes widened. He was certain that if this gem had blood, it would be running as cold as ice.

“But that's…”

He observed once more as her eyes traveled over his body, stopping on his lips, his eyes, and finally
his gemstone.

“NO…! You’re! You can’t be!” She stuttered, in what seemed like two voices. She whimpered fearfully, backing away slowly.

“Blue… Diamond.” she realized. He thought it was odd, that she was talking to herself. The gem glowed brightly, almost seeming to split apart down the middle.

Steven watched in awe as the mystery gem returned to normal, fleeing toward the beachfront statue like a wounded animal.

Finally, the boy spoke. “Pearl, who was that? Why was she trying to attack you? Was she a police officer coming to get you because you're an illegal alien?!”

Pearl shook her head, gracefully leaping to Steven’s side. In a brilliant flash of light, she summoned a weapon from her gem. The sword was sleek and blue, with an elegant silver guard. Most dazzlingly of all was a blue gemstone for the pommel.

“That was a Crystal Gem.” she whispered. “And a disgrace.”

Steven clutched his shirt nervously, backing away from the fence. “She seemed really scared… of me.”

Pearl grasped his hand, ignoring all of her qualms with such an action. “We must flee.”

A strong feminine voice rang out across the beach. “Blue Diamond!”

Now it was the servant’s turn to be terrified by an enemy leader.

The thought to be dead Rose Quartz stood across them beyond the fence. Oh, how Pearl regretted staying. But at least they had lasted this long...

He looked down to his shirt, seeing his gemstone. Steven gazed at the sleek scythe in his hands. “Me?”

Rose’s face dropped. “Wha?” Then she burst out laughing. “Garnet! That’s just a human!”

A violet head peeked out from the folds of the white dress. “What's pearl doing over there all blue?”

Pearl calmed herself, pointing her rapier at the Crystal Gems. “We don't want trouble.”

“That certainly is her pearl. And her weapon. And her… gemstone?” Rose said confusedly.

Without any inhibitions, she floated over the fence and down in front of the baffled boy.

Steven backed away slowly. “Who… the heck are you?”

Rose Quartz raised an eyebrow. “You seriously don't know who I am? What are you..?”

Pearl pushed Steven back with her free palm. “Steven. Trust me, she's dangerous.”

“You're a human, and a gem, aren't you?!” the pink haired gem excitedly queried. “How is that possible?”

The blue servant was even more confused. She lowered her sword slightly. This Rose Quartz seemed nothing like the one from the war. She seemed like… she was distracted by her curiousness.
A child, that's who she reminded her of.

Steven looked around, and saw a familiar face next to the violet one, standing several feet behind Rose.

“Pearl, who's that?” he asked confusedly.

It was another pearl, but she didn't say anything.

He slapped his cheeks, gasping. “These guys were hurting you, so I completely forgot these guys are Gems!”

Pearl was at a loss. In front of normal strangers, he was nearly as silent as her. Yet here he was, acting as if these gems were long lost kin.

That was most likely it, that he saw kinship where there was none only because they were the same species.

Rose narrowed her eyes, smiling at him. “But you're half…”

“My mom was-” Steven began.

“Steven, No!” Pearl quietly exclaimed.

“-Blue Diamond. Did you know her? I think the tall one did. She must have been afraid of her, though. That's understandable, she was pretty tall too.” Steven reasoned.

The pink woman snickered. “You're awfully funny. Surprisingly agreeable for… a Diamond.”

Pearl just watched this exchange silently, appearing defenseless but ultimately ready to strike.

“Rose! G-get her or something! It's obviously a ruse!” the other, white pearl exclaimed. “R-right?”

The violet childlike gem with white hair scuttled forward on all fours. “I dunno, P. I like this one! It's another pearl, too!”

Steven looked to Pearl. “These guys don't seem like bad people.”

Pearl merely frowned. “They- Crystal-”

“You didn't happen to bring an army with you, did you?” Rose coyly asked. There was silence. “You're more than welcome to join us. Y-”

“Rose!” the white pearl exclaimed. “Are you-”

Pearl cleared her throat. “A proper pearl should be seen, not heard.”

Other Pearl, as Steven decided to mentally call her, blushed blue.

The violet gem snickered. “I'm Amethyst.”

“Steven Universe.” the boy greeted cheerfully, sending his scythe to who knows where.

Rose raised an eyebrow at him. “That sounds familiar, and not just because you're.. the son of Blue Diamond.” she said disbelievingly. “No matter how many times I say it, it doesn't sound possible.”

“Rose, I think we should just bubble both of them and forget this whole incident happened. This is
obviously not a threat, and I believe we should keep it that way.” Other Pearl suggested.

“Garnet didn't foresee any danger.” Rose argued. “Besides…” She looked Steven up and down unnervingly. “This is… extraordinary. Blue Diamond was right here on earth, and we had no idea. We could all be dead.”

Steven glanced at Pearl confusedly. “Whys that?”

Rose glared at Pearl passive aggressively. “No reason. Right, Pearl?”

She felt her eyes being pierced under her hair. Pearl gulped, very intimidated. “Y-yes.”

“I'm guessing you have no clue how you work.” the pink Quartz guessed. “Why don't we all help you discover what you are? You're very exciting to me. Five heads are better than none.”

Other pearl scoffed. While she adored Rose Quartz, she had trouble seeing how this was a good idea.

Pearl considered the offer. Then a horrifyingly chilling thought struck her.

The cluster. Immediately she took the offer. “Yes.” The only reason they hadn't deactivated the cluster was because Pearl knew she couldn't do it alone.

In the beginning, Pearl hadn't planned on staying long enough to see the planet expire.

Pearl’s main concern was Steven’s safety, and potentially putting him in danger was the best way to ensure he was unharmed in the long run.

Rose’s full lips curled into a smile, but the gesture had the opposite effect that what was expected. Pearl considered it menacing. “Excellent. You're going to be extraordinary.”

Steven didn't realize the odd behavior. “Where's the tall one? I need to apologize for breaking her sunglasses.”

“Garnet.” Other Pearl said with annoyance.

The blue Pearl curled her lips in disgust. Did they always stay fused?

Steven inquisitively climbed over the fence, scrambling to look at the massive four armed statue. “Wow!” he sighed.

Pearl raced forward, diverting a strike to Steven with her rapier.

Some ruby had attempted to punch him to death, but now she was lying in the sand.

“I WON'T LET YOU LAY A BLUE FINGER ON SAPPHIRE, YOU CRUSTY-”

The enraged red gem stopped immediately when a cold hand touched her shoulder.

It was a Sapphire. Presumably, she was the second half of the Garnet. “He's a human.” she calmly said. “Cool down.”

Pearl watched with slight disgust as Ruby and Sapphire drew close, speaking in hushed whispers.

With a flash of light, they were the large Garnet once more. The stoic woman crossed her arms, repairing her visor.
“I’ve got my eyes on you.” she warned Steven, although her tone was shaky.

The boy looked around excitedly. “Is this your fortress?”

Rose Quartz approached them, smiling. “Yes.”

Amethyst ran up to him, dragging him by the arm. “Let me show you my junk piles! You can pick anything to take home except my garbage!”

Pearl watched with bated breath as they disappeared into the minty doorway. When it was sealed, her anxiety returned.

Other pearl pointed a spear at the blue Pearl, glaring. “Spill. Why is Homeworld here?”

She decided it was prudent to reveal the truth. “After what… you did.” she whispered. “My Diamond was overcome with grief. I followed her here as she decided to stay, and die with this planet.”

With an eyebrow raised, Rose pushed the spear to the ground. “To die with this planet?”

Realizing her mistake, she cleared her throat and clasped her hands. “She met a human that showed her a different way to think.”

Rose hardened her gaze. “I did what I had to to protect my friends. And my cause.”

“My Diamond nearly came to forgive you.” Pearl said in a whisper. “But for the grief you caused her, I do not.”

Other pearl scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I don't expect a subservient pearl like you to understand the sacrifices we made.”

Pearl kept silent, as that was false. She and Blue Diamond had come to realize the flaws with their government. Of course her faith in the Diamond Authority did not falter, but changes had to be made to avoid another crippling rebellion.

Homeworld could not survive such a heavy loss again. The earth Kindergarten survival rates were barely four percent.

She remembered her Diamond’s exact expression when Pearl presented her with the earth census at the end of Era One. There was barely enough for a few squads to be stationed.

It was one of utter defeat. Blue looked kicked while she was down from the loss of pink.

Earth was ultimately a crippling blow to Homeworld. Technically there was a gem gain, but a huge resource drain.

“So where’s Blue Diamond?” Rose queried. “Are you just a babysitter now?”

“Dead.” Pearl revealed. “That is all I feel comfortable revealing.”

Garnet merely grit her teeth. “Is Homeworld interested in the Earth?”

“No at all.” she whispered. “You have nothing to fear, as long as you do not harm Steven.”

Rose chuckled coyly. “Is that a threat?”
Pearl shook her head, chilling even Garnet with her words. “It’s a promise.”

The Quartz stepped forward, into Pearl’s personal space. She was forced to step backward, stumbling.

“If I have the slightest reason to suspect you or that boy are putting us in danger, I’ll turn you into a toe ring.” she promised coldly, despite her ridiculous threat.

There was a crashing sound as both Amethyst and Steven clambered out of the former’s room, carrying pieces of metal and chuckling.

“Pearl, these guys are cool! And they can teach me about gem stuff!” he cheered.

“You're more than welcome to join us on our missions.” said Rose Quartz.

He smiled. “That sounds so magical and cool!”

Pearl grasped her charge’s shoulder. “Perhaps we should leave for home.”

No one objected as they began their walk to the fence. The Crystal Gems followed them closely, until they stopped to hop the fence carefully.

Garnet adjusted her visor. “You were up there the whole time?”

They all looked to see the palanquin resting on the plateau far away. Frankly she was surprised these Crystal Clods hadn’t found them before.

“I knew we shouldn't have fenced ourselves off, Pearl.” Rose remarked. “The real Blue Diamond could have been up there.”

Steven stopped, looking to Other Pearl. “Pearl, is she your cousin or something?”

“Gems do not have ‘blood’ family.” she answered in a whisper. “She is just another pearl. Gems are made, and gems of the same type are similar to each other.”

He craned his neck to look at the Crystal Gems as they walked away. “So, is there more of mom? Of them?”

“No your mother. Diamonds are one of a kind. But yes, there are more of all of them. The Amethyst should be much taller, though.” Pearl whispered with distaste.

Then he opened his eyes wide. “Oh yeah! Did those blue and red gems… combine?!?”

Pearl curled her lips into a displeased frown. “It’s called fusion.”

Steven laughed heartily. “I learned so much today! Can we fuse?”

“No!” she immediately shouted. Upon seeing his confused face, she blushed. “M-my apologies. Fusion between you and I would be… improper.”

He raised an eyebrow. “They seemed pretty okay with it.”

She recalled that Sapphire and Ruby who had done so millennia ago. In fact, they single handedly allowed the rebellion to continue. A chill ran down her spine as she recalled what the Garnet back there had comprised of.
Pushed down memories of the rebellion came flooding back to her. It was that same Garnet. The Crystal Gem’s steamrolling tank.

How she had not realized such a thing was beyond her. Frankly, it was frightening to think that such a thing had slipped.

She only wished she wasn't making huge mistakes.

OxOxO

Greg ran his fingers nervously through what little hair he had left. “Crystal Gems?!” he exclaimed. “The ones who… did you know what?”

Steven was asleep in his bed a floor above them.

Pearl pursed her lips. “The very same. Rose Quartz, her renegade pearl, the abomination Garnet, and some defective Amethyst.”

“I thought you said they were all dead?” he said neutrally. “They were supposed to be dead because Homeworld went even further after the Crystals went too far!”

“I don't know how they survived.” Pearl whispered. “But I believe we are safe. They realize Steven is not his mother. Besides… we may not have to evacuate the earth.”

“Evacuate?” he asked slowly.

She hung her head. “This planet has an expiration date that is rapidly approaching. I was planning on running back to Homeworld when the time came.”

Greg sighed in annoyance. “What about all the people?! I- listen, pearl.” he said. “I trust your judgement. The truth is, I'm just a middle aged nut. Just… I trust you.”

She nodded politely. “Thank you, my- Greg.”

Pearl had merely slipped.

Pearls weren't made for big decisions…
The inhabitants of the palanquin spend the day playing old video games.

Greg entered the palanquin house, a cardboard box tucked under his pale and sunburnt arm. A smile was plastered on his scruffy bearded face.

“Steve-o! Pearl!” he shouted happily, when he saw they were not on the ground floor, and light was filtering down from the ladder.

The boy and the blue Pearl peeked their heads over the edge, eager to see what was new. Their slight smiles came soon after.

Steven slid down the ladder, followed by pearl. The cheerful boy embraced his father tightly. “We missed you!”

They broke away, and Greg presented the box to his family. “Yup. But going to my old storage unit three states over sure was worth it. For this…”

Pearl cleared her throat politely. “Is that what I think it is?”

Greg flipped the cardboard flaps skyward, showing off the contents. Inside was a grey box with purple detailing, with assorted wires and darker grey cartridges.

“Ta-da!” he exclaimed. “It's my old Super Grintendo Entertainment System!”

Steven gasped, his blue eyes full of wonder. “Old video games!”

Pearl pursed her lips. This machine was not at all, in any war, old, at least in Gem terms. Her current outfit was several hundred times older. Human lifespans were something she pitied.

A secret part of her mind was terrified of their lack of longevity. Eventually they would lose Greg to time.

Would Steven age and die? Given that he was twelve and had barely changed since he was eight, pearl was hopeful.

It was a morbid thought, but perhaps his gem would be passed down to his children. At least then she could serve a Diamond. Really, the only thing she could see that had changed since Blue’s death was that she was slightly more vocal and optimistic. Other than that, being with Steven was exactly like being with her Diamond had been, up until her unfortunate demise.

But twelve years was much too soon. Any human lifetime would be too soon to lose the boy. She loved him dearly, rather than the adoration for her Diamond.

Greg seemed to share her sentiment about the age of this machine. He rubbed the back of his head,
Pearl momentarily lost control of herself when she spotted something familiar to her in the box. It seemed to her that the only things in existence were herself and this box. Without asking for the permissions that she did not need, her graceful fingers carefully picked up a silver metallic cartridge. It read ‘Legend of Zella’. “My Diamond…” she whispered.

Steven tore her back to reality forcefully. “Pearl?”

The man carefully approached the cartridge with his sunburnt hands. “Oh. I-“

Pearl presented it to him. “My apologies."

“What's going on?” the boy asked carefully. “Is that made from real magic silver or something?"

“The reason why I buy every new Legend of Zella game is partially because of this.” Greg explained, offering the cartridge to him. “It was your mother’s favorite game. She liked a lot of human entertainment, but this was her favorite.”

Steven’s eyes went wide at he stared at the small piece of his parent’s history. “Woah… Did you like this one, pearl?”

“I prefer games with more substance.” she whispered. “Overall, I prefer watching them to playing them.” Pearl blushed dark blue. “But I do like Tetronimo.”

True to its name, Tetronimo was a puzzle game about matching Tetrominoes. Pearl’s tastes were very particular. She liked puzzle games, but not puzzles such as the ones in Zella.

Steven nodded. “So, is this one as good as Wind Awakening or Flute of Time?”

“It's a little… aged, but it's the original.” Greg said enthusiastically.

Steven smiled, running toward their box television. “Well, let's play it!” He set about determinedly unhooking the current systems plugged in, such as the GameBox and Grintendo 65.

The man and pearl followed him, expertly setting the machine up. Father and son sat on the couch as Pearl stood nearby with her hands clasped.

With an abrupt flash, the game was at the title screen. It was a simple screen, with only the title and ‘press start’ flashing at the bottom.

Steven carefully looked at the rectangular controller, pressing ‘start’.

Greg and Pearl’s hearts sank in sync.

There were three save files on the cartridge, evidently. It was a shock, because these old cartridges’ stored data eventually crumbled away with time. The internal batteries could be replaced, but not without erasing the data.

They read ‘Greg’, ‘Andy’, and… ‘BD’. It didn't take a Peridot to figure out what ‘BD’ stood for. To their surprise, Steven didn't ask about what was obviously Blue Diamond’s completed save file.

“Who’s Andy?” he asked confusedly.
He turned around rapidly when he heard a choking sob. Greg felt a particularly painful wave of grief, but he hadn't made the noise.

Pearl’s visible features were contorted in emotional agony. Both father and son knew that even a minute reminder of her such as this could send Pearl into a spiral of grief.

She held a hand up when they stood to approach her. With the other, she wiped her hot tears away. “My apologies.”

Greg nodded. He had been trying to help her overcome her grief the same way he had for Blue, but he realized it would probably be a lost cause.

Just by talking without being spoken to, she was going against her entire existence.

After all, she had a subconscious programming like every other pearl, and being ownerless was something hard for her. He had come to realize that she was slowly moving away from treating Steven as such.

Slowly but surely she was coming out of her shell. It was a confusing and painful transition.

So they waited as her silent tears ceased on their own.

“You okay?” Steven concernedly asked.

Pearl bowed slightly. “Yes, My Dia- Steven. Yes… Steven. I was merely overcome with grief.”

Steven nervously fiddled with his hair. “Uh… we don't have to play this game.”

“I am fine now. Thank you for your concern.” Pearl whispered. “Play it if you wish.”

Steven looked at his palms. “I don't want to hurt you…”

Greg rushed to the box. “We can play Super Potato Brothers 3 instead.” he suggested.

Eventually the boy got caught up in the box again, conversing with his father.

Pearl internally berated herself for the ‘unpearllike’ behavior. They didn’t care, but every fiber of her being was telling her she was in the wrong.

She missed her Diamond.

OxOxO

Steven yawned, turning over. He sat up tiredly, wiping crumbs from his face. “W-what time is it?” he yawned.

The boy crept around the dark house, looking for a clock in any form. No light was filtering in from the windows, so he had guessed that he had fallen asleep in the middle of the day.

He finally found his digital cookie cat alarm clock, squinting at the flashing display.

7:38.

“Whoops.” he chuckled. It would seem that he had played video games on his father’s old SGES until he had dropped.
Pearl touched his shoulder lightly, slightly startling him. “You're finally up…” she whispered.

He clutched his beating chest, panting. “Pearl. Hi.”

“I didn't mean to frighten you.” she said assuredly.

Steven knew she didn't, she was just naturally stealthy. The dark room certainly didn't help her be known.

The boy went to a window, parting the curtain. Red light filtered in. “Woah!”

Pearl came to his side, seeing what the commotion was about. It was a red eye, a form of Homeworld surveillance device. “Oh, my.”

Was Yellow or White Diamond looking for them? Secretly, the blue servant was thrilled.

They watched as a beam of light started toward the Eye. It eventually collided with it, causing both a deafening boom and a flash of light.

Luckily they were not close enough to the city to be pelted with debris. “The Crystal Gems must have taken care of it.” she sadly realized.

Steven cheered, pumping his fist. “That was so awesome! The Crystal Gems are so awesome!”

Her heart broke silently. The Crystal Gems, in her opinion, were a bunch of rowdy shatterers. She knew she wasn't the only one in the universe who shared that sentiment.

However, she was fairly certain that the boy’s mind would change. Spending enough time with them was sure to do the job, and then they could move away peacefully! All she had to do was bide her time. That was effortless, because as it stood, Pearl possessed infinite time.

Garnet crashed through the heavy curtains.

“BLUE DIAMOND!” she yelled. “I've seen through your lies!”

Pearl dropped into a defensive stance, summoning her rapier. Her eyes narrowed under her periwinkle bangs.

Perhaps she didn't have to wait after all.

The rest of the Crystal Gems appeared shortly after. Rose Quartz’s lackeys never strayed too far, it would seem.

They did not miss the way Rose addressed the fusion. “Ruby and Sapphire. You aren't thinking straight.”

Other pearl pursed her lips in embarrassment. “Why would they just send a surveillance drone if they knew we were here?”

Garnet slumped momentarily, holding her forehead.

Steven raised an eyebrow. “What's going on?” He had no idea why they had burst into his room, and frankly it was just getting even more confusing.

The Crystal Gems all turned their heads to the blue Pearl. She felt uncomfortable under their gaze. Those eyes had once seen horrible conflict.
“The Red Eye?” Pearl said quietly. “Perhaps it was checking to see if you were… still occupying this planet.”

Garnet grit her teeth, putting a palm on her forehead. “She's not lying.”

“See?” Rose condescendingly asked. “Nothing to worry about. We can absolutely coexist with them.”

“I'm not convinced.” the fusion remarked.

Other Pearl looked the Rose Quartz for validation. It was as if even she was having a hard time believing this would turn into a beneficial arrangement.

“Let's just go home and eat garbage!” Amethyst suggested animatedly. “I'd rather be doing that than hanging here with better Pearl and Ste-man!”

The white pearl scoffed, blushing. She placed her hands on her hips, looking down at the violet gem. “What do you mean by ‘better pearl’?”

Rose Quartz, and even garnet couldn't help but snicker.

“I dunno, you like- talk a whole lot, and she doesn't.” Amethyst supposed casually.

A slight and subtle smile pulled at Pearl’s lips. Even a compliment at someone else's expense was still a compliment. Pearls rarely got compliments beyond ‘what a nice form your pearl has taken’.

Other pearl huffed, blushing even deeper. “As least I'm not some subservient toy.”

An awkward silence came upon the group. She did not apologize, increasing the uncomfortable attitude.

Rose took a hint, moving for the door. “We’re sorry to have-” she stopped as soon as she saw Greg. Similarly, he could not take his eyes off of her. “Mister Universe?” she asked disbelievingly.

“Mysterious pink lady!” he exclaimed in recognition. The exact same that had attended his show seventeen years prior. “Or… Rose Quartz?”

Panic ran through his mind. Did his twenty-two year old self really have a crush on such a dangerous individual?

Rose Quartz giggled, looking to the baffled Steven. “You certainly have a type, Mister Universe.”

Both Pearl were looking frantically between the two parties.

The white one latched onto Rose’s arm, dragging her away. “It's time to leave, then!”

Rose giggled once more. “Good bye, Universes!”

Pearl nervously closed the heavy curtains serving as a door. Today had been stressful, and they had barely been around the Crystal Gems for minutes!

It asserted to her that perhaps they shouldn't be so trusting after all. In her opinion, true trust was a two-way street. They simply weren't receiving it, and she supposed that it was partly her fault. Although, no one was blameless.

Steven yawned, as if he was completely oblivious to the thick tension that threatened to smother
everyone when they congregated with the Crystal Gems.

It felt… wrong for both Greg and Pearl to be exposing themselves to the Crystal Gems. The person who was at one point the most important in both of their lives was deeply hurt by these people.

Both were too awkward around the other to say anything that even hinted toward displeasure with their current arrangement.

“Pearl… are you up for playing some Deathly Encounter? I fell asleep before I could check it out. It's two-player.” the boy asked unsurely.

Greg’s eyes went wide. “Uh, that probably isn’t a game a twelve year old should be playing.”

“Is that the one where the humans eviscerate each other for the chance at eternal glory?” Pearl whispered quietly.

The boy’s eyes went wide. “What does eviscerate mean?” he asked in amazement.

“It means that boys named Steven shouldn't play it until they’re a little more mature.” Greg scolded.

Pearl nodded in agreement, fully realizing what kind of game it was.

“I guess I'll just play Kirbo then.” he supposed.

That was a much more appropriate and wholesome. It was bright, happy, and “Cute.” she whispered with an awkward smile on her face.

Greg looked to her, as he hadn't quite heard correctly. “What was that?”

“N-nothing.” Pearl dismissed quietly, blushing blue.

Steven went to the window, staring at the city. Some part of it were on fire, but he was sure the Crystal Gems were on top of it. They had told him they were protectors of humanity.

“Man… how the heck do you think they exploded that giant eyeball? Does Garnet shoot lasers from her third eye?” he wondered genuinely. “I wish I could shoot lasers from my eyes.”

Pearl and Greg smiled at his naïveté. “That beam looked identical to the one fired by a Laser Light Cannon. Homeworld has much more powerful weaponry now.”

The man looked to her with wide eyes.

“Homeworld? Is that the name of our home planet? I always guessed we were aliens, but wow! I have to say, I was expecting something more like ‘Gemopolis’ or ‘Rockis’.” Steven said excitedly. “I can't believe I finally got that out of you.”

Pearl bowed low. “My apologies. I did not realize I had led you to believe I was hiding anything. In the future, do not hesitate to ask.”

She expected him to immediately ask question about how a gem worked. Perhaps he would ask who his mother was mourning. However, he did not ask any of those things.

“How come you watch me when I sleep?” he asked coyly.

Greg smirked, stifling a chuckle.
She looked away, blushing. “I merely wish to ensure you do not suffocate in your sleep, among other things. I would be devastated if I lost you too.”

He stepped forward and embraced her tightly. “Aw, Pearl! You don't have to worry about me!”

“You nearly fell down the ladder when a spider crawled by.” she quietly reminded him.

It was his turn to blush. “Why do they have so many legs?!”

Pearl wracked her mind. She was quite the bookworm, when she wasn't clinging to Steven like lint to a black shirt.

“They simply do. The only reason they haven't evolved to have less is because it works for them, or it's too useless to change. It is the same reason why you and your father have nipples.” Pearl answered knowledgeably. “They have no use on males of your species, but they aren't detrimental to your survival.”

Steven merely raised an eyebrow. “So… they have eight legs because they work?”

“Spiders have remained relatively unchanged for dozens of millions of years.”

It astounded her just how much everything changed on this planet, even when it wasn't.

Greg rubbed the back of his head. “Alright, I think I'm going to head to bed, guys.”

Pearl bowed with her hands still clasped.

“I'm going to sleep late, tonight. I've been asleep for hours.” Steven said.

They said their good nights, turning the lights on at a dim level.

The boy sat down on the couch. He noticed that pearl was still standing, so he motioned for her to sit. “Take a seat.”

“Oh… alright.” Unsurely, she sat down as politely as she could. Her legs were crossed, and she clasped her hands. Gems had no etiquette for sitting properly.

Steven picked up the remote, surfing through the various channels their rigged satellite picked up. “I wonder what's on Cartoon Channel today…”

“YOUR NEW FAVORITE SHOW!” the channel blared.

“Nope.” Steven pursed his lips, resuming his search for something to watch.

American television had impressed him greatly. Not to say that Korean programs were less than ideal, but he could only speak so much of the language. He was just fluent enough for conversation.

Pearl, rather than subject herself to pointless and mind numbing human programming, escaped into her thoughts.

But she was subsequently ripped from them.

“What kind of video games or tv shows do Gems have? I bet they're really advanced.” he beamed.

“Gems do not have such things.”
His eyes went wide. “What?! Are they all stuck with radio?!”

“As you know, full gems do not need rest or become physically exhausted. Everyone is a cog in a machine, and there is no time for rest.” she whispered.

“How sad… Maybe we should head back and bring Pocketmon with us.”

Pearl supposed perhaps that day would come eventually.

She hoped it would.
Steven and Pearl receive backpacks from Wacky Sacks Supply Company.

Steven sat on a stool near the curtain entrance to the palanquin excitedly. He slapped his thighs rhythmically, humming a tune. The boy was patiently awaiting something.

“My- Steven?” Pearl quietly queried. “What has you so excited?”

He turned to her, winking slyly. “I ordered us both a surprise off of Zonama!” he exclaimed.

The online site that had everything available for purchase, and then some? Pearl pursed her lips with disapproval.

It went against all of her programming to act like a motherly figure, like she was in charge of the boy. However, she was obligated to inquire further.

“Did you get permission?” she whispered.

Steven sat back, kicking his legs up. “Yes and no. I used the rest of the gift card my dad gave me for my last birthday.” he reported cockily.

Pearl bowed slightly, dipping down about forty five degrees. “My apologies.” False suspicion only increased her discomfort.

He composed himself, frowning. Steven just didn't understand why she was always apologizing. She wasn't even doing anything wrong. Pearl was the one asking if he was misbehaving, and it was a reasonable assumption.

Suddenly, there was rapping on the side of the Palanquin. The boy gasped, darting outside the house.

“Jamie!” he said excitedly.

The young man panted, obviously exhausted from the hike up here. It was why he only delivered mail every three days. At a certain point, it just transformed from exercise to torture.

“Hello.” Jamie panted exasperatedly.

“Did… you bring me mail?” he asked expectantly.

Jamie opened his messenger bag, searching inside for post. With every heartbeat, he could see the strained veins in his eyes. His luscious hair was drenched in sweat.

“Did you… order… two boxes from Wacky Sacks Supply Company..?” he queried tiredly.

Steven handed the man a water bottle, which he gulped down quickly. “Sure did! This thing is going to help me save the world.”
“A wacky sack?” he questioned, giving the moderately sized boxes to the boy. “How on earth?”

Steven nodded dutifully. “Exactly! I've been training with my magic guardian for a long time, and I just met even more magical people. I want to prove to them that I'm just as capable at being magic as they are!”

Jamie raised an eyebrow. “Again… with a wacky sack?”

“Exactly!” he said. “It's novelty backpacks!”

Jamie seemed to understand, nodding in realization. “Oh, I get it. Well, I'll see you mister Universe.”

he remarked cheekily.

Steven winked, pointing at him. “Mister Universe is my dad!”

The man waved away, beginning his trek to the city. Steven watched him for the first half of his journey, ensuring harm didn't come to him. Jamie had almost fallen many times. Yet he still delivered the mail up here.

Jamie was a true American mail carrier hero.

As soon as he was certain of his safety, the boy charged into the palanquin with his boxes. He nearly slammed into pearl, but her reflexes allowed her to dance away.

“Are your parcels delivered?” she whispered.

He took a closer look at the boxes, handing one to her. “This is a present for you!”

Pearl blushed, accepting it. Truthfully. “Oh... thank you, Steven.”

“I know that mom gave up her physical form to have me... but you're the closest thing I have to a mother! So I just wanted to say thank you!” he explained, embracing her tightly.

She closed her eyes, bending down slightly in order to reciprocate. Her heart was warmed by this gesture. Tears threatened to come to her tired eyes, but she fought them off bravely.

“What is it?” Pearl queried softly.

Steven giggled cheerfully, winking at her. “You'll have to open it and see!”

Pearl strode gracefully to the kitchen counter, setting the package down gently. After all, she had no idea what could be inside. The servant did not bother to read the printed information.

With a small flash of light, she summoned a miniature version of her elegant rapier. It was barely the length of her hand.

“Woah! Letter opener sword!” he breathed in awe. A thought came to his mind. Why didn't he try to summon his scythe more often? It reminded him of his mother. Something he had lost before he had even had her.

He clutched his shirt, deep in thought.

Pearl sliced the packing tape carefully, turning the cardboard flaps upward. She removed the bubble wrap from the box, gazing upon her prize.

She gasped, thoroughly surprised. Forgetting all etiquette, she smiled widely, fully exposing her
pearly teeth and pulled the novelty satchel with one strap from the box.

It took the shape of a bright blue frog. Its large black beady eyes stared up at her. She nearly lost further control due to how adorable it was. Pearl could nearly keep her eyes off of it.

“Thank you, My Diamond. I mean, Steven.” she whispered cheerfully.

Steven grinned widely, satisfied with her reaction. “I knew you'd like it.”

Pearl ran her fingers over the soft fabric that the bag was made from. It had a single compartment, a zipper for the mouth.

She was glad he had gotten her a bag, and not an actual frog. Pearl may have adored them, but she did not admire their sliminess.

“I do.”

The boy hastily set about opening his box. Steven excitedly pulled his own bag from inside. “Cheeseburger backpack!” he exclaimed.

“Oh..?” she whispered in confusion.

He immediately showed it off to her. Steven sought her approval constantly. A testament to how much he thought of her as a mother figure.

“Look! Every ingredient is a pocket! Even the cheese is a pocket!” he exclaimed, showing that indeed, every single cheeseburger item was a compartment.

Their attention from the bags was diverted as someone cleared their threat from outside their home.

“Ahem.” They recognized the voice as the Crystal Gem’s pearl.

“Come on in!” Steven suggested eagerly.

Other pearl entered carefully, observing the room carefully. She took in every single detail.

It was obvious to the blue pearl that she was doing reconnaissance, even if it wasn't her primary objective.

“May we help you?” Pearl questioned with hostility in her quiet voice.

She frowned in obvious displeasure. “We have a mission to go on, and Rose insisted I ask you two to come.”

Steven beamed, immediately formulating a response. “Of course! Where to?”

“The Lunar Sea Spire.” Other Pearl said. “Meet us at the temple when you're ready to go. Don't take too long.”

Pearl glared under her bangs at this condescending behavior. She clapped her hands twice, standing tall. “That will be all…” she whispered.

The white pearl blushed blue, an irritated frown curling onto her face. She balled her fists up, turning to leave. “Steven, I don't mind if you leave your toys here!”

She thrust a small statuette into the boy’s hands. The moon goddess statue. “Rose said to give this to
you! Don’t forget it…”

Other pearl charged out of the palanquin in a mood.

Pearl remained calm as always.

The boy rubbed the back of his head, turning his sharp blue eyes to his mother figure. “That was kind of mean…”

She said nothing. Disobedient pearls were no good, in her eyes. Her owner had been dead for a decade, and here she remained!

Crystal Gems surely must have defects that go incredibly deep in order to be so… rebellious. Pearl would not dare dream of disobeying a Diamond, let alone disgrace a Diamond and… his… pearl!

At least the Lunar Sea Spire was a place she was looking forward to seeing once more. It was an oasis for gems, and even she had a chance at relaxing there in the past.

“My Diamond, you should pack warm clothes, and an extra pair for our journey to the Sea Spire. It is wet and cold.” she whispered.

Steven nodded dutifully, running to the ladder.

Hopefully, the Crystals would be agreeable on this trip.

OxOxO

It was nearly three quarters of an hour when Steven and Pearl arrived at the Crystal Gem’s beach temple fortress. The boy’s bag was slung over his shoulder, and ready to burst.

Two gems sat on the warp pad, clearly waiting for them. Rose Quartz, and her smaller counterpart, Amethyst.

“Where are Garnet and Pearl?” Steven queried confusedly.

The quartzes stood up, smiling. “They aren’t exactly comfortable with spending an extended amount of time with either of you yet.” said Rose.

The boy pursed his full lips. “Aw, man. I really wanted to spend time with more Gems.”

Amethyst giggled. “What are we, chopped liver?”

The pearl rolled her eyes under her bangs. “May we continue? I wish to see the spire after all this time…” she whispered.

Rose Quartz snickered at her forwardness. “What a renegade…” She joked.

“I ask that you refrain from referring to me in the same way as that sorry excuse for a pearl…” she requested quietly.

Amethyst burst out laughing, slapping the blue Pearl on the back. “This is why I like you, better pearl!”

Pearl stepped away blushing, returning to the boy’s side.

Steven pursed his lips in disapproval. He wished they could all get along, not just with Rose and
Amethyst.

The massive pink quartz stood on the warp pad, motioning for those off of it to follow. “Come along, and we can begin our mission.”

Steven carefully stepped onto the crystalline disk after his guardian.

“Don't be shy! Warping is eaaaaaasy!” Amethyst assured him.

He had never done it before, but he could sure guess what warping was. To say the least, he was nervous about it. Additionally, he was worried about disappointing his new friends.

Rose flashed him a toothy smirk, holding her left thumb up.

All of a sudden, they were enveloped in blue light. Steven began to float upward, causing him to panic. The quartzes snickered in amusement as pearl silently grasped his sandaled foot to keep him from floating dangerously far away.

Eventually, he got used to it. So he started to laugh with the quartzes. Pearl merely remained quiet. She saw no joke in her precious charge floating to a cold lonely death.

He nearly slammed to the ground when they arrived at their destination. However, the ever vigilant and careful blue pearl set him down carefully.

Steven gasped at the majesty of this place. On all sides they were surrounded by roaring waterfalls. The air smelt salty, informing him they really were at a ‘sea’ spire.

As if that wasn’t enough to confirm it, there was a large stone tower behind them, with many floors. The night sky shone brightly above them.

“The sea spire!” the boy beamed.

Pearl smiled slightly. She had always wanted to bring him to this place. It was one of the completed colony structures. Also, it was one of the only completed buildings that still stood.

“I don't know if pearl told you, but we have to get that Moon Goddess statue to the top before midnight. The entire spire will collapse without it.” Rose explained.

As if on cue, a large chunk of the second floor crumbled away into the churning depths below the spire.

“This place looks trashed.” Amethyst remarked. “I should know.”

Pearl frowned at the state of the structure. It was in much better shape when it was created, as obvious as that was. Just another reminder of how truly extraordinary the earth colony would have been.

Rose Quartz began a solemn march toward the hill preceding the Sea Spire. She stopped abruptly at the cliff’s edge, holding her arm out.

“What's the hold up?” the violet Quartz queried. She sized up the small gap between the Lunar Sea Spire and their humble group. “We can clear this, easily!”

“The magic sustaining the whirlpool will suck you down and drown you.” Rose sternly warned. “Whoever planned this vortex made it to be powerful, and to last.”
Steven started to formulate a plan. “So then how do we get over?”

“Can Rose Quartzes not float?” Pearl asked quietly. They barely heard her over the rushing water. “Why not go over the vortex’s pull?”

“I couldn’t get you three over.” Rose said neutrally. We’ll have to think of something else.”

The boy sat down, unzipping his backpack while the others were distracted with planning. Suddenly, he pulled several sweaters from his bag.

Without a second thought, he charged the gap. The boy looped the arms of the sweater around a pillar, and jumped. Immediately he was pulled down.

Amethyst’s eyes went wide.

Rose stood, completely unfazed.

Pearl shrieked, peeking over the edge. She was not ready to lose him! It only felt like yesterday she had lost Her Diamond!

Immense relief flooded through her as she saw him scaling the wall. He was straining, but he was conquering it.

Steven panted when he reached the top, holding his arms outward.

The purple Quartz chuckled at his ingenuity. “Steven Style!” she exclaimed, replicating his actions with her studded whip.

She scooped up both Rose and Pearl, and jumped the gap. Everyone was laughing triumphantly at this point.

Save for Pearl, that was. She stood near Steven, ensuring he was safe in every way she could without touching him.

“Onward!” Steven exclaimed.

The group came upon a staircase that listed to the left, and they believe it continued spiraling until the top. So naturally, they followed it.

Steven was in awe of the sights, but Pearl saw through them. The walls and well-everything, was quite water damaged. She was certain that Rose Quartz was as disappointed in how the ages had treated this place, as well as she was hiding it.

“Did this used to have a head, or are there Gems like this?” the boy excitedly queried, referring to a near headless statue.

Rose giggled at his innocence. “It used to have a head. As soon as we get the statue in place, I assure you everything will be fixed. This place used to belong to your mother, you know.”

He gasped excitedly. “My mom was a real estate mogul?!”

Pearl frowned at how utterly wrong he was, but she did not correct him. It was her duty to keep such things from him until he was old enough.

“Sure.” Rose chuckled, continuing her ascent. “Blue Diamond owned a lot of property.”
Technically not wrong.

“How come I’ve never heard of this Blue Diamond chick?” Amethyst said neutrally.

No one answered her. They continued until they came upon a vast room.

The problems lied in the inhabitants. Nearly every inch of the floor was covered in segmented light blue slugs.

“What are these goobers?” Steven queried curiously.

“Crystal Shrimp.” said Rose Quartz.

Steven reached down to touch one, but Pearl moved him out of the way. “What's wrong?”

Pearl glanced at the unfazed Rose Quartz. “Their shards are deadly, especially to you.”

Amethyst surveyed the situation. “Then how are we going to get past them?”

Steven reached into his bag, throwing two bagels at the shrimp. “Bagel sandwich!”

Rose snickered. “How did you know that would work?”

The boy put his hands on his hips triumphantly as the shrimp parted into two groups. Their safe passage was now assured. “If I was a shrimp, it's what I would do.”

Amethyst burst out laughing. “You are a shrimp!” she said with hearty laughter. “Man, Rose, I really like this guy!”

He blushed, rubbing the back of his curly hair.

“So do I.”

Pearl didn’t know what to think about them still. A sense of… danger was always up around Rose Quartz. It wasn't just her history. Truthfully, it was if Rose Quartz was exuding… bad... waves.

They trudged along the beaten path, closing in on the top of the spire. Rose held her arms out once again, and a hole crumbled through the wall.

A rushing torrent of seawater blasted from the opening, creating a river moving much too quickly to walk through.

Rose, Amethyst, and Pearl all looked to him expectantly.

“Huh? Me?”

“Watcha got, little dude?” the violet Quartz queried.

Steven sized up the area. There were several pillars. “Uhh, can someone break that pillar, and we can use it as a bridge?”

Pearl moved to it hastily, striking the pillar with her rapier so quickly it appeared that her arm simply disappeared. She daintily tapped it with her slipper, and the pillar crashed down above the water.

Sure enough, it was just barely enough to make a bridge to pass over the river.

Rose nodded in approval. “Excellent plan, Steven.”
“Aw shucks.” he dismissed embarrassedly, walking over the pillar first.

The walk up the winding stairs to the roof was a short one. In moments, they emerged into the night sky. Multicolored and beautiful stars dotted it. The pale moon was nearly overhead.

In the center of the roof, they found a pillar. “Just in time.” Rose said neutrally.

“Time for the statue!” Amethyst cheered. “Aw man, I can't wait to see this thing all fixed up.”

Steven approached the pedestal and kneeled. The boy reached around in his cheeseburger backpack, but he felt nothing. His blood ran cold. “Uh oh.”

Rose tilted her head in curiosity. “You don't have it. Interesting.”

“I left it on my bed!” he realized with panic in his voice.

Pearl approached him, unzipping her adorable frog satchel. “I saw you leave it there…” She pulled the Moon Goddess statue from inside.


Rather than give it to the boy, she went ahead and placed the statue in its rightful place. She stepped back as it began to glow.

All of them watched as the statuette rose upward toward the moon. Loose pebbles sought out cracks and magically filled them. The waterfalls receded with a rumble.

Magically, the Sea Spire set out repairing itself.

Pearl and Steven looked to each other, unable to hide their joyous grins. Oh, how proud she was of him.

Rose nodded her head, looking around at the newly repaired Lunar Sea Spire. “You've officially earned my trust. Excellent performance today, both of you.”

Amethyst nodded rapidly as well. “I already like you guys, but today was great!”

Steven smiled. “Thank you! Does this mean we can come on more missions?”

The leader of the Crystal Gems smirked.

“But of course.”
Chapter Summary

Steven throws a barbecue on the beach.

Steven Diamond Universe was, on all accounts, a good cook. This was partially due to self-preservation as Pearl’s limited palette meant that she refused to taste-test most of her dishes, which as any good cook knew, was a surefire way to invite disaster. The Guacamole Incident still haunted Steven’s memories. And tastebuds.

He took particular delight in the sweet scent of meat slowly cooking over a grill. As demonstrated by his father, whose rumbling stomach was providing an unneeded accompaniment to the tune that Greg was playing on his guitar, the tang of the smell was almost as amazing as the meal itself. The man’s hair swayed slightly in the breeze as he leaned against his van and stared at the perfect afternoon sky, which blended almost perfectly with the deep blue of the ocean. Pearl stood nearby, hands clasped as always, watching the scene impassively.

The peaceful silence was finally broken by Steven’s father. “Smells good, Schtu-ball!” Greg exclaimed.

Steven looked over his shoulder, winking at his dad. “That’s cuz Pearl and I used… special ingredients when we made the patties.”

Pearl nodded curtly. “I read about a particularly tasty seasoning. I hope you find it acceptable.”

He nodded, running his free hand through his curly brown hair. “Pearl, you've never gone wrong when it comes to cooking! Well, at least when you’re not the one doing the cooking. Or are anywhere near it.” There was a brief, awkward pause. “I think you should try ‘em!”

“I will taste it if you wish, my Steven, but I would prefer not to eat any of it.” she replied quietly, barely audible over the sizzling. When it actually came to tastes, much like the boy, she favored sweets and savory things.

“‘Kay!” Steven chirped, taking another deep inhale as the scent of the meat was enriched by the recent addition of Pearl’s spice.

“You going to get Amethyst and the other Crystal Gems?” Greg said, leaning against the side of the van and glancing at the imposing statue carved into the side of the nearby cliff.

Steven shook his head. “Nah. I mean, it’s kinda impolite to invite them down here if we don’t actually have anything yet. Plus, things are still weird with them. I’d like to keep the awkward silences to a minimum.”

“Good call, Steven. And this barbecue is a great idea! Glad you thought of it. Nothing like good food to bring people together, after all.” Greg sighed. “At least, I hope so.”

Greg was acutely aware of how dangerous they- well, Rose Quartz- were supposed to be. From what he had witnessed, the Crystal Gems were more afraid of Steven than anything else.
And, well, Rose was a little flirty. That took a bit of the edge off of the whole, “terrifying rebel leader” schtick, but it made things a lot more awkward. She kind of reminded him of Blue, actually. Those kind smiles, those wide eyes...

No. Greg was done with romance. No matter who or where Blue was, Greg held a special place in his heart for her that he would never give up for anyone else.

They heard the warp pad activate. All three of them craned their heads to see Garnet had warped in, her arms crossed. Suddenly, she let out a whimpering cry. Garnet glowed white, and in an instant, she fell apart, her two gems clattering to the floor before quickly reforming into Ruby and Sapphire.

There were a few seconds of silence. Both parties stared at each other warily. “Do you… want some food?” Steven asked, tentative.

Ruby scowled animatedly, letting out a roar. “KEEP YOUR GARBAGE!”

Ice branched out from underneath the sapphire’s dress. “Wait… Let’s-”

“Sapphire, she was going to shatter me! You! SHE HATES LOVE!” the little firecracker yelled.

Sapphire sighed. “That was Blue Diamond…” The ice at her feet spread out further. “Steven… she… he deserves a fair chance.”

Ruby’s demeanor softened, but her scowl persisted. “Alright, Sapphy. But if it ends up poorly-”

“Then you can tell me ‘I told you so’,” she said calmly. “I just can't stand being alone, but if we don't resolve this, it will only keep happening.”

Ruby touched Sapphire’s face lovingly. “Don't force yourself to do this. I know you're afraid too.”

The ice around her feet expanded further. “Don't worry about me.”

Steven blushed at the public displays of affection. Somewhat distracted, he let out a small yelp as he quickly adjusted the meal on the grill so it wouldn’t be scorched. “You guys can fuse, I don't mind.”

“Nah. We’ll keep your pearl comfortable,” Ruby growled sardonically, glaring at Pearl.

“Ruby,” Sapphire said calmly.

Ruby took a deep breath and exhaled, the puff of air from her breath shimmering from the heat. “Okay. Okay. We’ll… we’ll stay apart,” she conceded, while still staring daggers at Pearl.

Steven smiled tremulously. “Well, you're welcome to some food, guys. You know, if you want some. When it’s finished. Which should be pretty soon,” he rambled.

Greg nodded in agreement. “We have enough for all the Crystal Gems, if you want. Although, your pearl probably won't eat if she's anything like ours.”

Ruby and Sapphire approached them hands firmly clasped around each other, steam trailing from behind them.

The red gem picked a piece of corn from the grill up, ignoring the heat. “What the heck is this?”

“That's corn.” Steven giggle. “It's pretty good, you should try it!”

Before she could take a bite, the entire ear was lit ablaze. She frowned, staring down the corn like it
was some hated enemy. With a wave of her hand, the fire was extinguished. “You're welcome,” she told Ruby.

Ruby blushed slightly, nodding. She appraised the now smoking ear of corn. Unsurely, she took a bite of the small end of the cob, gnawing on it. “How do ya eat this crud?”

Steven smiled patiently. “Hold it sideways, and eat the corn off the cob!”

So she readjusted it, biting the cob in half with a sickening crunch. “Tastes like a piece of coprolite…”


The boy’s expression sank at Ruby’s distaste. “Oh, sorry you don't like it. I- uh, I can make you something else if you'd rather-”

“No!” Ruby interrupted, uncomfortable with Steven’s insecurity. She had no idea as to why the boy wanted their approval. “It's fine.”

Sapphire pointed at the meat on the grill with her gloved hand. “I would like to try that in two minutes.”

Steven’s smile returned shortly after. It was a little awkward, but at least the blue one was speaking. He opened his mouth to speak.

“I can see the future.” Sapphire said neutrally.

He raised an eyebrow. “What?”

The seer clasped her hands. “You were going to ask what powers we had. I can see the future.”

Steven’s eyes lit up. “You really can! That's exactly what I was going to ask!”

Ruby pursed her lips, glancing away sourly. “It's nothing special, according to you.” Either Steven was both Blue Diamond and an exceptional actor, or he was actually a human boy who happened to have a massive gem stuck in his chest. The latter seemed to be the case, but Ruby the memory of Blue Diamond’s callousness still burned white-hot.

“That's pretty out of this world.” Greg remarked, strumming a few simple chords on his guitar.

Ruby threw both halves of her burnt corn to the ground. “I can't do this!” she roared.

Pearl shifted her balance into an optimal battle position while her charge raised an eyebrow. “Can't do what?”

Sapphire shook her head, her springy hair bouncing. “Ruby. Don't.”

Ruby’s face contorted into an almost comically enraged expression. “YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DO!”

“I believe it's time for us to leave. Ruby, I foresaw this, but I had hoped your tendency to avoid my linear prescience would show itself once again,” Sapphire said. Ice cracked at her feet, evaporating into steam when it met the shimmering air around Ruby.

Ruby grumbled something under her breath and took the blue gem by the hand, stomping towards the Temple.
Greg shrugged when they were out of sight. “Can't win them all, Steven.”

Steven pursed his lips. “I know that. I just really wanted to be friends with them!”

“I bet you'll just have to give them time. It took a while before Pearl saw me as anything but a useless bag of meat!” Greg remarked with a lopsided grin.

Pearl bowed low, holding her arms out in graceful poise. “My apologies…”

Greg rubbed the back of his head, his eyes flicking away from Pearl. “Uh, it's okay. I was just joking.”

“Heeeeeeey!” a familiar voice shouted from around the corner of the Temple. Steven’s smile grew broad as Amethyst rounded the corner.

“Amethyst!” Steven yelled, flipping his burger over with a sizzle.

She put her arms behind her head and casually strode up to the van. “Yo, Steve! Better Pearl! How’s it hanging?” she asked.

Steven chuckled heartily, happy to be in her company. “Like a sloth!”

Amethyst wordlessly approached the grill, shoveling the half frozen meat and other barbecuriosities into her open mouth. Steven’s jaw dropped.

Greg ceased his strumming, staring as well. “That was for everyone…”

With a white flash, Amethyst’s face became Greg’s but in her violet flesh. “I am everyone.”

Steven’s eyes lit up in a similar yet figurative sense. “What?! You can turn into my dad?!”

Amethyst responded by becoming an exact purple replica of Steven, down to the finest hair.

Greg rubbed the back of his head nervously, glancing at Pearl while the boy laughed. “Eeeuuugh…”

Pearl resisted raising an eyebrow, staring at Greg. Then it hit her. For Blue Diamond to be able to normally interact with him, she had to shapeshift. Such a blatant abuse of that power would bring back bittersweet memories for the human.

“Can I do that?!” Steven asked excitedly.

Amethyst became her normal self, leaning against the van and crossing her arms. She shrugged. “Probably. You had better start with something easy.” Amethyst pursed her full lips in thought. “Maybe a small animal?”

“A cat!” Steven exclaimed. “Yeah, a cat! That’ll be so cool!” Then he alternatively wriggled and tensed his muscles, making rather ridiculous faces. After Amethyst had gotten her full of watching the boy squirm, she interrupted him.

“That sounds good!” she said loudly, catching Steven’s attention. “Now follow my lead. First, think of what you wanna be, and then, just shake it out.”

Amethyst demonstrated her explanation by transforming into a fluffy purple cat.

Steven laughed heartily, enjoying the show. “Can you do that, Pearl?”
Pearl nodded curtly. “All Era One Gems have the ability to shapeshift.”

The violet gem became herself again. She stared at Pearl inquisitively alongside Steven. “Era One?”

Pearl looked to Greg for advice on what to do, but found none. She could think of no standard protocol. Was this even something to hide? Instead of replying, she held out her hand. Pearl hoped this would work. It was a fortunate thing that Steven was but a child, and easily distracted.

For a pearl, it was a desperate plan. Shapeshifting was improper. Frankly, it was an insult to the Diamonds, as Gems were made in their glorious image.

But she still turned her hand into the head of a blue cat. It moved like a regular living feline. However, it made no noise.

Her guess was correct, as both young gems were instantly enamored. It amused her. It was always invigorating to see Steven so enthused.

“Wow!”

“Ha!” Amethyst exclaimed. “You really are better Pearl! Regular Pearl would never do that!”

Anxiety crept upon her, and her hand was exactly that once more. Her hand. She bowed down about ninety degrees. “My apologies.”

Amethyst snickered silently. “Apology accepted, better Pearl. No problem, dude.”

Steven, on the other hand, was concerned. He approached Pearl. She stood tall and sobered.

“Pearl? You're fine. I thought the cat hand was funny. And kinda cute, too!” he reassured her. “Let me take a crack at it.”

All three in his audience were amazed at what came next. With a grunt and a satisfied laugh, Steven’s gemstone glowed.

They watched with wide eyes as flesh seemed to melt from his ankle and trickle inches away. It expanded and slowly became a cat with fur that matched his hair. It was tethered to him by the ankle.

The thing meowed and rubbed up against his leg.

“What the…” Amethyst muttered, taking a step back.

Pearl cupped her hands over her mouth in shock. No gem had capabilities this refined on their first attempt.

Greg wheezed, sitting up with eyes full of panic. “Cat! St-Steven!” he gibbered.

Amethyst crouched down next to Steven, stroking the cat’s fur. “This is totally whack.”

Steven stared down at the feline, grinning. “I guess I'm pretty good at this.”

Amethyst crossed her arms tightly. Her cheeks darkened as she gazed to the ground. “It's pretty obvious to me this isn't your first try. Quit showing off.”

The boy took upon a look of concern. “What do you mean? I've never done this before.”

“Yeah, I can vouch.” Greg said. “This is a first, and it's giving me the willies.” He shivered.
Amethyst looked to Pearl for the final validation. “B.P?”

“He has never used any of his abilities save for summoning his weapon in my presence…” she whispered in awe.

The sheer power Steven was exuding was impressive. Pearl could feel his magic, so achingly reminiscent of her Diamond, crackling in the air and resonating with her gem.

“Aw, come on!” Amethyst shouted, wildly gesticulating. “Are you kidding me?! Not only can you make perfect cats effortlessly, but they can make sounds too!?”

Steven wilted. “I-I'm sorry.” he stuttered. “I'm not trying to make you angry or anything.”

Pearl’s lips curled downward into a frown. Amethyst took notice. Sighing, she slumped. “No, sorry! It's just, I had to practice a lot to get where I am.” the violet Quartz admitted. “Good job, Steven.”

Steven nodded, still somewhat shaken by Amethyst’s outburst. He knelt down next to the cat and stroked its silky fur, wondering how this was possible. The boy glanced at the uncanny ‘flesh tether’ that tied him to his creation.

“How do I... um, you know, turn it off?” They all watched as he struggled, pulling at the string of meat that connected him to the cat.

“Simply cease shapeshifting” Pearl suggested quietly.

Steven groaned as he tried to dismiss his vestigial cat, his eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. “Don’t you think I’ve tried that?!” he snapped.

Pearl reeled back, quivering slightly. She despised his occasional childish fits of frustration. They were nothing more than that, but her instincts as a Diamond’s servant remained. She feared them, no matter Steven’s gentle nature.

“Steven!” Greg remanded. “Don't talk to adults like that. She was just trying to help.”

Steven grimaced, poking the feline. “I can't make it go away!”

“A-Amethyst?” Greg asked, worry plain in his voice.

She knelt down again, carefully inspecting Steven and the cat. “I don't know what to tell you. It's like walking to me. Do you remember every step you've taken? He'll probably tire out from stretching himself too much, and turn back. Dunno, man.”

Pearl swallowed hard. “Diamonds have near infinite stamina for shapeshifting.”

“What?!” Steven squeaked.

Amethyst’s eye twitched slightly, then she threw her arms up in exasperation. “Jeez! Why does all this weird Diamond stuff have to make everything so freaking complicated! Ruby and Sapphire are actually arguing, worse Pearl is constantly glaring daggers at you, and Rose is treating you like a ticking time bomb that she has to defuse with friendship! You’re just a kid. What does also having a big ol' blue rock stuck in your chest have to do with anything?” she vented, her speech obviously the result of several days of pent-up frustration.

Pearl clenched her teeth when Steven opened his mouth to speak. The situation was tense enough as it was. She didn’t need Steven complicating things further.
“I dunno.” Steven said, to Pearl’s immediate immediate relief. She still couldn’t place why exactly she felt so panicked when he revealed himself to these traitors. “Maybe Diamonds are special, just like regular diamonds are here on earth.”

Amethyst shrugged noncommittally. “Who knows. All I know is that it’s seriously not fair how good you are at this.”

“I’m no good at this.” Steven grumped. “I can’t even make this dang cat go away.” The cat, meanwhile, was purring contentedly in the sun.

Greg rubbed the back of his head. “Pearl, you don’t have any ideas?”

Steven snapped to his feet, his eyes shining. “I have an idea!”

“What is it, my Diamond?” Pearl queried. She was stumped. Thinking was not a pearl’s job, after all.

The boy held his outstretched arm above the cat. He grunted and groaned, straining himself. When his finger extended into green cucumber, he laughed heartily.

Greg clapped a hand over his face. “Steven, I don’t think that’s going to work, bud.”

Steven proved them all wrong by carefully extending the vegetable until it rested upon the ground behind the cat. Pearl merely watched with an expression of confusion.

That is until reality mirrored something Steven had shown her. When the cat turned around, it was immediately startled by the green vegetable. The feline yowled and jumped onto Steven, tackling him to the sand in a panicked frenzy before dissolving from the logic paradox that Steven had set up.

When Steven sat up, he laughed triumphantly. “Haha! I had a feeling that would work!”

“Exceptional thinking…” Pearl whispered. She would never have thought of such a scheme.

Amethyst was not so impressed. “Whatcha going to do about your cucumber finger?”

Steven opened his mouth to reply. The words, just like an idea, would not manifest themselves. He slumped down, staring at his elongated vegetable digit.

“Oh, man…” he whined.

That was when Pearl began to fear for her charge. She had to do something, even if it wasn’t her place. “My Steven,” she said quietly, sitting down with her legs folded in front of him. Her posture unconsciously softened as she called to mind all the techniques she had used to calm Steven from his various odd human mood swings when he was younger.

He nodded in acknowledgment.

“Command it to stop.” she whispered.

Steven glared at it, his brow furrowed as he desperately willed the vegetable to disappear. Pearl nodded slightly, a small smile just barely visible. Pearl’s subtle encouragement gave him new reserves of willpower. With a glow, Steven’s pointer finger shrank back down into its normal fleshy self.

Greg released a sigh of relief. “Jeez…” he muttered.

Amethyst frowned. “Good job, Steven. Lesson over.” she grumbled.
Steven’s delighted expression did not last for long. He watched with disappointment as she walked away from them.

“Why was she so upset?” Steven asked.

“Clearly she is not used to someone with more aptitude for shapeshifting than herself…” Pearl said. “I, for one, am proud of your achievements today.”

“Yeah.” Greg added. “Steven, you learned something really cool about yourself today! That’s something to be proud of. Look, kiddo, I can tell that Amethyst likes you. She’s just upset for now.”

“I really don’t like it when people don’t like me.” Steven quietly admitted.

His father sighed. “No one does, Steven. But, you just can't win them all.”

“I like you.” Pearl offered in consolation.

That caused Steven to chuckle. “Yeah, of course you do. I know you provide me, and care for me, and you wouldn't want to do that if you don't like me.”

If only he knew how difficult it had been at the beginning.

“I just wish we could get along perfectly all the time,” Steven said, wistfully staring up at the perfect blue sky. Such a thing was impossible, and he knew it.
Pearl observed as her charge fumbled around in a plastic tub. Various caps and other headwear were scattered around him. She simply raised an eyebrow, electing to stay silent and await for her Steven to speak first.

Steven put something from the freezer into his pocket, a glowing ring of some sort. “Have you seen my bike helmet?” he asked, turning around to face her. Understated anxiety was written clearly across Steven’s expression.

“A bike helmet.” Pearl said quietly. “In January, my Steven?” It was much too chilly to go riding bicycles. Her Diamond’s particular brand of logic was… unconventional, true, but this was a tad beyond his usual level of obliviousness.

Steven nodded. “Yup! I’m going to ride my bike, and safety always comes first.”

“Forgive me for being so forward, but I do hope you have a good reason to go outside,” Pearl whispered.

His cheeks reddened. “Nope! Don't follow me!” he nervously exclaimed.

“Yes, my Steven.”

Pearl stepped backward, giving a short bow. He had not meant this as an order, but she was bound by her Diamond’s word. Rarely did he actually give her strict instructions, and even then they were tongue-in-cheek. But who was she to determine whether they were genuine or not? It was Pearl’s duty to be an instrument of her Diamond’s will, no matter his intention.

So Pearl just watched as he rushed outside after finding his red bike helmet. She only wished she had told him to be safe. These were troubled times.

Steven trudged out of the Palanquin and into the tall grass, the wild wheat rustling in his wake. He was naturally intelligent - brilliant, truly - but sometimes Pearl could not quash her treasonous opinions on her Diamond’s complete and utter lack of common sense.

The boy mounted his bicycle and attempted to ride through the green grass. Naturally, he fell, so Steven had to walk his bicycle until he reached more manageable terrain. After an eternity of prickly seeds, Steven arrived at the dirt road and climbed his indigo bike once again.

He pedaled into town, his heart racing. However, it was not Steven’s furious pace that sent his heart beating so quickly. There was another reason Steven so desperately wanted to visit the Temple.

He inhaled the salty ocean breeze, barely fighting his smile. Luckily, it was warm for a January day. Steven glanced around at the familiar sights as he pedaled, smiling at the idyllic, immutable life that the citizens of Beach City led.
He waved to Amethyst, who was smashing a tin can into oblivion with a rough chunk of concrete. Amethyst perked up, immediately returning Steven’s toothy smile as she morphed into a purple carbon copy of the boy. When Steven passed by her, Amethyst returned to her default form and attacked the fragments of the can with renewed vigor.

Steven turned onto the beach and yelped when nearly lost his balance. He grunted as he struggled through the shifting sands. Steven appeared to be making a beeline to the Crystal Gem Temple, but he stopped just short of the turn.

Sitting against the rock wall was a girl. Her coffee-brown skin contrasted pleasantly with the soft yellow of the sand, and her flowing black locks waved in a slight breeze. She wore a simple white and aquamarine dress and ovular glasses with a pink tint, which shined in the light of the sun as she unconsciously adjusted their position. Her pronounced nose was figuratively and literally buried in a novel with no visible title.

Steven gulped, standing nervously near his bike. “T-that a good book?” he blurted, utterly failing in his attempt to be casual.

She glanced up momentarily, looking him up and down. Soon she was back, and her voice was shy, but not quite as quiet as Pearl’s. “Y-yeah. I like it. You probably wouldn’t, though,” she muttered.

Steven nearly fell backwards onto his bike, but caught himself at the last second. He chuckled nervously. “Oh yeah? I like all kinds of books! Even bad ones!” he said with forced bluster. “I mean, I, um, I don’t like bad books. Who would? I mean, that’s why they’re bad, right?” He coughed. “What’s it called?” His heart sank as he felt his opportunity to make a friend slipped through his grasp.

“Uh, Dogcopter..?” she replied, blushing slightly as she hid her face with the book.

Steven unsurreptitiously let out a breath that he didn’t know he was holding. At least they had good taste in literature in common. “Really? I love those books!”

That caught her attention. She looked up from her book, blinking in confusion. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I've read every single one at least three times, and I've seen both movies,” he explained.

“But you didn't like the adaptation very much, right?” she carefully asked.

“Not the first one - they got the themes all wrong, and they cashed in on the crude humor just a little bit too much - but number two really improved upon the first.” he said, eyes shining with diamonds as he nerded out. “I hope the third movie remembers the lessons it learned from the first one when it comes out next month.”

Her eyes went wide with excitement. “Y-y-yeah.” she stammered. “The guy who directed the seventh Star Conflict movie is doing it, and that was pretty good. I've been wanting to see it since the first teaser for the first movie came out. Dogcopter 3 is my favorite book of the series!”

He closed his eyes, nodding. But before he could speak, he was cut off by a deafening roar. Something urged him - no, forced him - into action. Steven darted forward, tackling the girl to the ground, rolling so she was on top of him.

Steven smacked his forehead with his palm as numerous boulders cascaded towards them. How could he forget the most basic of societal conventions! “My name is Steven!” Steven shouted as he braced for impact. “Oof!”
When he opened his eyes, he was trapped underneath a cobalt blue sphere, with the girl hovering within. He watched as the rocks smashed into the bubble, crumbling away with a resounding clang.

“C-Connie.” the girl muttered, gaping at him. Steven watched as she tried to stand up while floating. “That’s my name. My name is Connie! Yup.” They stared at each other for a moment. Connie cleared her throat and poked the edge of the bubble, which bent slightly under her touch. “What happened?” she wondered. “I’m levitating! But… I’m safe?”

Steven had expected her to be flailing about in a panic. However, Connie was fascinated with her condition, experimenting with her sudden weightlessness as she moved about the protective sphere.

The boy slid out from under the bubble, scrambling to his feet. “I'm half magic.” Steven explained, smiling bashfully. “On my Mom’s side.”

Connie gazed at the surface of the sphere, brow furrowed. “You did this?” she asked, voice filled with awe. Her mind was racing with the various possibilities.

Steven stared at the walls of the bubble with equal confusion. “Apparently.”

The children looked at each other wordlessly. After a few moments, Connie broke the awkward silence. “How long does this usually last?” she asked with fascination.

“This is a new one.” Steven muttered, rubbing the back of his head.

“Oh.”

Steven blushed once again. “So, I, uh, don’t see you around here that often.”

“My dad works for a bunch of beaches as a security guard, so we never really stay in one place very long.” Connie answered absentmindedly, her hair brushing the floor of the bubble as she tentatively pushed herself into an upside-down position.

“Kind of like me and my family. I moved here from Korea about five years ago,” Steven explained. Connie’s eyes widened. “Really? That's pretty cool.”

Steven’s cheeks appeared to be permanently stained red at this point. “Yeah.”

Connie unsteadily flipped herself right-side up. “So..? Can your magical mom help us out with this? Maybe she can get me out.”

“I, uh, don't exactly have a mom anymore.” Steven admitted, but before she could express condolences, he spoke again. “But I do have some magical friends around town who might help us!”

“Oh. Um, where do they live?” she asked.

Steven began to roll her back towards town. “Well, um, they actually hang out just around the bend in this big statue of a giant woman. But the way up there is kinda steep, and I’m not sure that most of them are even there right now. I think Amethyst is still smashing stuff behind the Big Donut, though! She’ll be able to help out. Probably. Hopefully. Maybe? And even if she can’t, Lars and Sadie can get you out of there! Sadie’s super strong and stuff,” Steven rambled as he trod over the sand, which was thankfully much easier to roll a bubble on than to ride a bike over.

Connie tried to stay silent, assisting him in rolling onto the concrete, even though her efforts were hindered by the lack of gravity in the bubble. But she couldn’t contain herself indefinitely. “This is so
cool!” she squealed, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand from embarrassment. Steven couldn't help but to crack a smile.

Sure enough, when they rolled behind the donut shop, Amethyst was still there, smashing cans into smithereens.

“Woah, how the heck did you get yourself into this mess, Stu Blue?” Amethyst chuckled.

“His bubble… magic… thing activated and, um, saved me from some falling rocks. A lot of falling rocks.” Connie answered.

“Right on! Got yourself a girlfriend now?” Amethyst quipped, her mouth turned upwards in a teasing grin.

Both of the childrens’ cheeks darkened. “C-c-can you, um, help us get Connie out of the bubble?” Steven mumbled, utterly mortified.

The back door to the Big Donut swung open. “Who's back here?! I told you to p-” Sadie shouted, wielding a stool threateningly. “Oh, it's just you, Amethyst. And Steven. And...”

“Hi Sadie!” Steven said.

The teenager knit her brows. “Um, Steven… what is all of… this?” Sadie gestured inarticulately in the general direction of Connie’s bubble.

“Do you have, um, anything that could get me out of here?” Connie asked.

Amethyst glanced at the stocky teenager, then at the bubble, then at Sadie again. The Gem tore the stool out of Sadie’s hands, earning a squawk of outrage, and brought it crashing down with all her might on to the bubble.

The chair cracked into a dozen pieces and hundreds of splinters.

Grunting in frustration, Amethyst wrapped her whip around her knuckles, bringing her hand back for a punch. Connie let out a small yelp and dove for the side of the bubble, but the odd properties of the bubble’s local gravity gently brought her back to the center. She opted to close her eyes and curl up into a ball instead.

Amethyst’s haymaker didn’t even make a dent in the bubble. “Well, I got nothing,” Amethyst said, shrugging.

Steven looked down, deep in thought. “Do you think it's hard to pop because… I'm a Diamond?”

Amethyst rolled her eyes. “I guess that might make sense.” she muttered.

Nothing was said for a few moments. “Is she done punching the bubble yet?” Connie asked, not daring to open her eyes.

Steven nodded, then realizing that Connie couldn’t see him, answered, “Yeah. It didn’t do anything. Sorry.” Connie breathed a sigh of relief and uncurled from her ball, her glasses slightly askew before she pushed them back into place.

Steven snapped his fingers. “Maybe Pearl will know what to do?”

“We probably don't even need her.” Amethyst said. “Why don't you just whip out your scythe and pop the dang thing?”
Sadie, bewildered, raised a single finger as if to speak up, then shrugged and reentered the Big Donut.

Connie looked to Steven expectantly, but the boy avoided her gaze. “I can't summon it on command. Not yet, anyways. I've tried every single day since we met you.”

“Let's go to this Pearl person if she, um, might be able to help out with… this,” Connie suggested.

Steven groaned, clutching his forehead. “Wait! No, no, no. Dangit! I'm so dumb! We can't roll all the way up the hill!”

Connie’s mouth fell agape. She glanced at Steven, then at the distant blue palanquin that was just barely visible against the white clouds, then at Steven again. “That’s your house?” It certainly looked magical enough.

“Eh, I got it.” Amethyst casually lifted the azure bubble with both hands, then, with a grunt, she shapeshifted a third arm to grab Steven by the collar of his shirt. She snorted in amusement as both children flailed about in a panic.

“A-amethyst?” Steven squeaked. “What are you doing?”

The Gem smirked. “Hold on tight, kiddos.” Amethyst crouched, then jumped hundreds of feet into the air, soaring above Beach City, Connie and Steven’s shrieks soon fading into wild laughter.

Then they reached the top of their arc. Laughter turned into screams once more as their stomachs leapt into their mouths. Neither of them had truly appreciated how pleasant it was to have their feet firmly rooted to the ground before.

Having had her fun, Amethyst sprouted wings from her feet. Carefully, making sure not to crush the children, she slowed their descent.

Connie and Steven were panted as they touched down. “That was awesome!” Connie yelled, stars shining in her eyes.

Steven was still quite pale from his ordeal. “I- I- yeah, it was!” he lied as his stomach performed an entirely unwanted gymnastics routine.

Amethyst gently set Connie and Steven down, then leaned against the cobalt bubble as it began to roll downhill.

Pearl emerged from the palanquin, then gasped when she saw the scene before her. “Steven?!” she shrieked, then clapped her hands to her mouth, mortified.

“I'm here!” Steven cheerily responded.

Gulping, Pearl composed herself, and nearly folded in half from the depth of her bow. “My apologies, my Steven.” After a few seconds, she returned to a standing position, then raised an eyebrow from behind her thick curtain of hair. “And what, pray tell, are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know. Just dragging - or, well, flying - their sorry butts up here so you can help 'em out.” Amethyst crossed her arms. “Sooo… can you?”

Pearl shook her head once. “Pearl..?” Steven asked, his voice wavering. “Um… I’m pretty sure Connie needs food. And water. Which, um, you know, she can’t get inside that.”
She bit her lip and relaxed her stance. Unclasping her hands, Pearl took a deep breath - a surprisingly effective meditative habit - and in a flash of light, a brilliant blue rapier emerged from her gem, smoothly falling into her hands.

“Woah!” Connie exclaimed, instinctively taking a step back. She promptly fell flat on her face, then, eyes wide, scurried to the edge of the bubble.

Twirling her rapier, Pearl leaned into a back stance, mentally calculating the optimal angle of attack. She lunged forward, her blade a sapphire blur as it sped towards the bubble.

Her rapier snapped in half, and Pearl’s momentum sent her colliding into the bubble. Steven, Amethyst, and Connie all winced in sympathy for Pearl’s plight.

“That’s a first.” Amethyst muttered.

Pearl leapt to her feet and ran a hand over her aching scent sponge. “Apologies, my Steven.”

“It’s fine.” Steven sighed. “Now what are we going to do..?”

Pearl quickly ran through all of the possible solutions for the conundrum before her. If enough force were applied to break the bubble - if that was even possible, considering her Diamond’s capabilities - then the human trapped within would certainly come to some degree of harm. They could wait it out, but it was possible that the bubble would never go away. Her mind returned to that odd barbeque at the beach, and the similar issue that arose with her Diamond’s powers. That was her solution.

“My Steven,” Pearl whispered, her voice soft as silk and strong as steel. “You are a Diamond. Your authority is absolute: over Homeworld, over your colonies, over your subjects, over yourself.” Amethyst raised an eyebrow. “Remember that always.”

Steven raised a finger questioningly, then he nodded grimly, then took a deep breath, steeling himself. Questions could be saved for later. He looked at Connie, who was still more enraptured with the strangeness of her situation than afraid. He would do it for her. Steven threw his fist forward, roaring. “Go!” he commanded.

The next thing the children knew, Connie was thrown against the wall of the bubble. It had flown forward, slamming into the Palanquin and bouncing backwards like a rubber ball. Steven trailed behind the bubble as the bubble flew, eyes wide with terror.

They returned to screaming as they sailed through the air. Steven didn’t even know where they were when he landed. It wasn’t even on his mind that he shouldn’t have survived the fall. His back hurt. His head hurt. Everything hurt.

The bubble was lodged in a tree, splintered branches breaking its fall. Steven panted, rubbing his aching arms.

“Connie! Are you okay?” the boy asked, voice filled with worry. Did she get hurt? It was a wonder he didn’t break anything, she was just a human-

The young girl got to her feet, her whole body shaking. “It’s not okay! I’m trapped in a magic bubble that’s stuck several feet above the ground in a tree because you have absolutely no idea what you’re doing! Now I’m going to starve or suffocate in here and only my parents will notice because nobody else cares about me!” Tears streaked down Connie’s face as she glared at Steven, equal parts enraged and terrified.

Steven rubbed the back of his head. “You seemed like you were having fun at my house…”
“That was before you sent me hurtling through the air for hundreds of feet!” Connie snapped. “It was a neat little adventure before! Now I'm going to die in here, and, and...” she sat down and hugged her knees, sobbing.

“What?”

She wiped tears from her eyes. “And I'm gonna disappear without making a single friend….”

Steven pursed his lips, reaching into his back pocket. Steven offered her the glowing bracelet. “We… we can be friends. If you want. I saw you at the Boardwalk Parade last year. You dropped your bracelet. I picked it up, but then I couldn't find you. I saved it in the freezer so it would last longer, in case I saw you again.”

Connie ceased her crying as recognition filled her eyes. She remembered in pristine detail what he had described. It was hard not to, when her mother had begun training her in eidetic recall when she was eight. In fact, she remembered Steven. Looking into his eyes, it was impossible for her not to, what with his kite shaped pupils.

“Oh! You were the kid on the car wash float.” she giggled. “You had soap bubbles in your hair.”

Steven adored her laugh. He chuckled along with Connie as his cheeks reddened, and said, “I was supposed to be a scrub brush. It was embarrassing, but I'm glad I made the effort to go.” Steven sighed and hung his head. “I'm sorry Connie, if I'd returned your bracelet back then, you wouldn't be stuck in that bubble now.”

Connie shook her head. “No, it's okay. I'm having fun. I mean, that was kinda cool, wasn’t it? With the flying and the sword and stuff. And also scary. But mostly cool!”

“Heh. I guess you're right. That was pretty fun!” Steven responded, smiling. All of a sudden, the bubble burst. Steven jumped forward, catching her in his arms.

Connie stood perfectly still for a few moments, then let out a triumphant whoop.

“I did it!” Steven said, elated. “I popped the bubble and you're not going to die!”

“Yeah!” Connie blinked. “Wait. Um… where are we?”

Steven looked around at the yellows and greens of the forest. Trees and bushes surrounded them. It was completely unfamiliar. “Uh, the forest?”

A low rustling reached their ears. Steven, adrenaline still coursing through his veins, attempted to calm his mind and summon his scythe while Connie dived for a particularly large branch that had been broken off from the tree by their fall.

Pearl and Amethyst rushed out of the foliage towards the two children. The blue Gem nearly reached out to hug her charge, then composed herself at the last second and clasped her hands at their normal position.

“How did you get out of there?” Amethyst asked, incredulous. “I'd never seen a weapon break on a bubble before.”

“Yes, how?” Pearl whispered.

“I don't know!” Connie beamed. “But today was so cool!”
“Yeah! Maybe you'd like to… hang out again?” Steven said, trying and dismally failing to be casual.

Pearl’s gaze hardened beneath her bangs. She knew exactly what was happening, and it horrified her. She was not ready. She couldn’t do it again so soon. But she did not voice her disdain. Pearl never did.

“Of course!” Connie exclaimed.

Amethyst chuckled knowingly.

“Really?” he asked in surprise.

“Yeah! You can show me magic stuff, and we can play tennis, and discuss literature!” The girl suggested.

He nodded. “That sounds great!”

“Um, does anyone have a pen and paper?” Connie asked.

Pearl wordlessly summoned a small sticky note and a ballpoint pen from her Gem and passed them to Connie. Connie began to scratch something on the paper.

“What’s that?” Steven inquired, peeking over her shoulder.

Connie looked up and smiled, handing him the scrap of paper. “It's my home phone number!” His mouth opened slightly as he received it. Steven held it reverently in his hands, as if it were some holy artifact.

Connie glanced at her watch and yelped. “Oh my gosh! My mom is going to go ballistic when I get home at this hour!” Connie began sprinting away, yelling over her shoulder. “I’ll see you! Call me, let's do this again!”

“Other direction!” Amethyst guffawed. Blushing, Connie ran in the way the Gem pointed.

Steven couldn’t fight his grin as he read over every digit in the number. He looked to Pearl and adopted his most devastating puppy eyes, which were largely lost on his caretaker. “Can I get a phone?”
Burning Down the House

Chapter Summary

Steven discovers Pearl's secret hobby.

“That. Was. So. Fun!” Steven exclaimed, leaping into the Palanquin. He whirled around to face Pearl, walking backwards and adjusting the red cartoon crab hat that adorned his head.

Pearl nodded, following Steven and holding his balloon. It was shaped like a green jellyfish, complete with dangling legs. “I agree. Earth life is so fascinating… There are so many creatures that lie within this planet’s water, and many haven’t even been discovered yet…”

“Just be glad it's Ocean World we went to, and not Ocean Town,” Greg joked, elbowing Pearl as he stepped through the entrance his family’s home.

Pearl flinched at the contact, edging away from Greg imperceptibly. “Oh yes…” she murmured. “Such a tragedy, Ocean Town.”

“Hey Pearl, were you made in a giant clam like the ones we saw in the mollusk exhibit?” Steven asked, collapsing into a pile of teal pillows.

The gem shivered. “Of course not…” Pearl harrumphed, her cheeks blushing blue.

Greg kneeled down to give one last hug to Steven, still perched on his pillow throne, then walked to the door and sighed, stopping for a moment. “Well, I got to get back to the carwash. Don't burn this place down while I'm gone!” he said, winking at Pearl.

She frowned. “I would never…”

Greg laughed good-naturedly and smiled, waving and closing the curtain behind him. “Idioms, Pearl. You still need to work on your human idioms. See ya guys!”

“Bye Dad!” Steven yelled. The boy yawned, slumping into his fluffy fortress. It was a long drive to the aquarium, and an even longer one back.

“Do you require rest, my Steven?” Pearl asked.

Nodding, the boy flopped over to the ladder leading to his bed. “I think this Steven needs some sleep. Night, Pearl! Don't burn the house down!”

She clasped her hands tight, staring intently at the floor through her bangs. Pearl’s cheeks flushed a deep cerulean “I-I would never...!”

“Idioms, Pearl!” he called from upstairs.

Pearl sighed under her breath and moved to her normal position precisely two feet to the left of the primary entrance to the Palanquin. The intricacies of human speech still eluded her. The universal translation field emitted by her gem didn’t provide local or cultural context to any of the odd turns of phrase that humans used, leaving Pearl perpetually confused while engaged in conversation with
humans.

Upstairs, Steven was arranging all of his pillows on his bed. However, as he wriggled beneath his mother’s sky blue blanket, something felt… off.

Of course! He’d left a bed pillow downstairs on the pillow throne! Steven crawled out of bed and hummed to himself as he slid down the ladder. The curtain that separated the Palanquin fluttered with movement in the corner of Steven’s eye. That was odd, it hadn’t been an especially windy day. And…

Where was Pearl?

Steven frantically scanned the Palanquin, cursing that the blue tint to everything made it rather difficult to see in the dark. Had Pearl gone outside? She certainly wasn't anywhere in the house.

“It’s probably nothing! She’s, um, she’s probably on a soda run or something! Yeah. Yeah…” Steven said, attempting to reassure himself. Taking a deep calming breath that utterly failed to work, Steven poked his head outside the Palanquin. All the tension left his body as he saw Pearl silently gliding through the tall grass, an old, rough-beaten satchel that Steven had given her for his birthday slung over her shoulder. It was clearly bursting at the seams.

Steven opened his mouth and quickly closed it, pursing his lips. Pearl clearly wasn’t going out on a soda run, no matter how delicious a Raspberry Sugar Shock Shutdown was. Hesitantly, Steven emerged from the Palanquin and followed Pearl’s path through the field as silently as he could. Steven’s caregiver wound through the grass and up to the road to Beach City before stopping. Carefully calculating the distance, Pearl sprung high into the air, landing at what Steven could just barely make out to be a workshop of some kind.

“A garage? Is Pearl a secret mechanic or something?!” Curiosity got the best of him, and Steven timidly approached Pearl’s take-off position and jumped precisely one foot into the air. With great disappointment, Steven wandered through Beach City on foot.

After five minutes of walking through the streets, Steven finally arrived at his destination. He carefully snuck around the perimeter, and spied a canvas sheet hanging in place of a garage door. With great care, Steven lifted up the sheet, peering inside.

Pearl was seated in front of an easel across from another woman with an identical one. Shockingly, the Gem was wearing human clothes: a red scarf, a beret, an ill fitting Mister Universe tee, and baggy jeans. Innumerable oil paintings of a familiar violet subject lined the walls.

“Amethyst?” Steven whispered, eyes wide.

Pearl immediately whipped her head toward an open window, and Steven silently cursed her amazing ability to use her ears.

“Another squirrel trying to break in?” Pearl’s companion, a middle-aged woman with hair that could only be described as a gigantic clove of garlic, asked as she scratched a few more lines onto her sketch.

Pearl shook her head. “I thought I heard someone…”

“Meh, it's probably my kid.” the woman said, shaking her head. “Now, where were we?”

“The body should be split into seven and a half heads.” Pearl whispered.
The woman nodded. “That's right.”

Steven breathed a sigh of relief. Obviously, Pearl hadn’t been coerced by some artist-themed serial killer, so the boy ducked under the tarp and made himself known, waving at the woman and Pearl. “Hi Pearl! Hi, um… weird old artist lady!”

Pearl was startled, dropping her pencil and scrambling around to face Steven. She stood up quickly, bowing down low with her arms outstretched. “My Steven! P-please forgive me…”

“Uh, this your kid?” the woman asked, eyebrow arched.

Steven stared at the floor and shifted from foot to foot. “Uh, no. She's like my… Nanny? Aunt? Something like that, I guess.”

“Well, I'm Vidalia. Nice to meet you. You want to get in on this art lesson too?” Vidalia said, her tone motherly.

“You're trying to become an artist?!” Steven shouted incredulously.

Pearl merely stammered quiet excuses in her embarrassment.

“She already is!” Vidalia exclaimed, presenting a sketch. It depicted a very angular and blocky version of herself. “It’s a nice style. Pearl here just wanted to learn to draw more realistically.”

“Wow, that's pretty good!” he exclaimed. “Pearl, you should really keep at this, if you like it.”

She nodded silently, relief flooding through her gem. Of course her Diamond would let her continue. He was Steven, not Blue Diamond. There was no reason to fear. And this was Earth, not Homeworld. Steven. Earth. It was easy to forget that sometimes.

“So, you want in? We have spare easels.” Vidalia offered, gesturing to the eclectic piles of artistic clutter that were scattered around the garage.

Steven looked around at the paintings of Amethyst that surrounded him from all angles. “Uh, I think I'll pass for now. I have plans. Also, um, why do you have paintings of… this?” Steven waved his hand in the general direction of a cluster of Amethysts.

“We’re friends.” she shrugged. “She's my favorite model. Amethyst is an alien rock, I think. She can turn into anything.”

Steven grinned. “So are we!” he said, pulling the collar of his shirt down to expose his gemstone.

Pearl gasped at Steven’s audacity, then, taking a few calming breaths, cautiously did the same with her scarf.

Vidalia blinked. “I mean, yeah. I figured.” Pearl’s eyes widened from beneath her bangs. “I mean, the blue skin was kind of a dead giveaway. You must be related to Garnet, Amethyst, Rose, or probably Pearl, right? Is Pearl a family name?”

“Gems don't have families in the… traditional sense,” Steven explained. “Except me. My mom, is, um, kind of me now? It’s really weird. She isn’t around anymore, at any rate.”

Vidalia shook her head and whistled. “That sucks, real bad. I have no idea what my Onion or Sour Cream would do without me. Their father certainly doesn't understand them…”

Steven’s mouth fell agape. “You're Onion’s mom?!”
“Yup. And you are?” she asked neutrally, smirking.

“Steven Universe!” he said incredulously. How a child so… onionlike could be birthed by a woman so cool was beyond him.

“So you're the Steven my boy mentions!” she exclaimed. “Onion loves to talk about you!”

As if on cue, the small child with a white sweater and red pants marched into the garage. His footsteps were quiet as a mouse, and his presence eerie.

“Yellow Di..?” Pearl was overcome by shock. Her first instinct was to bow in respect. She stopped herself, searching the boy’s chest for a yellow gem.

But she found none, and Steven was more unnerved by her sudden reaction than Onion. “Who's Yellow Die?”

“Not him…” Pearl told herself. Vidalia was his mother, after all. Vidalia was a human. Ergo, this… Onion was not Yellow Diamond. She chose to cling to that logical process rather than consider the unseemly implications of the child truly being Yellow Diamond’s heir.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Steven chuckled nervously and waved goodbye, walking to the tarp. “Well, I've got to be going! I'll see you at dinner!”

OxOxO

For the rest of the day, Steven watched the entrance to their house like a hawk, bouncing up and down in excitement. When Pearl tremulously lifted up the curtain to enter the Palanquin, Steven whooped and rushed down to meet her, startling the poor Gem into dropping her satchel of supplies.

“Pearl! I can’t believe you're a secret artist!” he exclaimed, running circles around his caregiver.

Pearl quivered, bowing low. “Forgive me, My Diamond.”

Steven pursed his lips and shook his head. “No, no, no! Pearl, it's okay to have passions! Why do you always treat me like a King? You're the closest thing I have to a mom!”

The blue Gem blushed and ducked her head “It's only proper…” she whispered. “I act how any pearl would.”

“Pearl over at the Crystal Gem Temple doesn't,” Steven pointed out.

“She is a defective renegade!” Pearl shrieked, her eyes shining beneath her bangs and her nostrils flaring. Immediately she shrank down. Oh, dear. No, she was the defective one for having an outburst like that! But… but there was no court, no Homeworld here. For goodness’ sake, why was she acting like this? Pearl was a free Gem now! No, no, she couldn’t have such seditious, traitorous thoughts running loose in her mind.

Salty tears began to roll down Pearl’s cheeks, and, in an instant, Steven wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace. He wasn’t an idiot. Pearl… wasn’t fine. She acted like it, always said that she was perfectly content, but she wasn’t. Not really. “Pearl… I’m twelve. You’re older than me by thousands of years, and Mom trusted you to take care of me. I don’t know how things are back on Homeworld, and I don’t care. You’re supposed to be the one taking care of me, not the other way around,” Steven said softly.

“Y-yes, my Steven.” she meekly said, mulling his words over.
“So… what did you draw today?” he asked as he stepped away from the embrace, trying to change the subject.

“Oh… um…” she muttered, pulling a scroll from her frog satchel. Pearl unrolled it and presented the charcoal drawing to her charge.

The sketch depicted herself with Steven, looking content. He sat on a bench while she stood beside him, prim and proper as always, hands clasped. It was beautiful! But... Steven sighed as he realized that Pearl didn’t even allow herself to think herself equal to him, even in her sweetest dreams. “Does drawing make you happy, Pearl?”

Pearl blushed slightly, and a tiny smile crept onto her face. “Why, yes, it does.”

She had discovered her love for drawing during her time as a courtroom sketch artist. Her fondness for expressing herself through her hands had really blossomed during that job, alongside Yellow Diamond’s Pearl performing her stenographer duties.

“Then you should keep doing it! Life is about doing stuff that makes you and other people happy! And since I’m happy when I see you drawing like this, and since you’re happy doing art and stuff, you should keep drawing,” Steven assured her.

Oh, that poor, naive child. If only he knew. “Would you… like to see my older pieces…?” she whispered. Steven’s eyes lit up. He flopped down onto his pillow throne, quickly shoving aside some of the pile to make room for Pearl.

Pearl’s gem began thrumming softly, emitting a brilliant spectrum of blue light. Pearl reached inside her Gem and retrieved a rhombus of translucent blue quartz. She grasped the top and bottom, stretching it out ten times it original size.

“Gem tablet!” Steven quietly exclaimed, his eyes wide as dinner plates.

Pearl tapped away at the screen, characters foreign to Steven rapidly scrolling past his vision. She took her seat, pulling up a drawing. “I haven't drawn since… in a very long time,” Pearl said. “When I first met Vidalia, I was reminded of how much I loved to create art.”

At first, the sketches were of blocky objects, but eventually she came upon equally blocky images of Gems. “Who is that?” Steven queried. On the tablet was a pearl similar to her, but her expression was smug, and her hair pointed upward in a perplexing cone.

Pearl’s face immediately dropped in displeasure. “Another pearl…” she muttered, voice sour.

“You don't seem to be fond of her…” Steven noted.

She sighed. “She’s full of herself. She's a self-important and sorry excuse for a pearl who abuses her position for validation.”

Steven shook his head. “Wow. Her self esteem must be lower than yours,” he blurted, then immediately covered his mouth in a futile attempt to keep the words from escaping.

Pearl’s finger dragged across the screen, leaving a white mark. Never once had he said something so… so un-Steven like. It hurt, but she did not cry. Old instincts were hard to suppress, after all.

A soft voice, an embrace before a farewell. “Never let them see how much they hurt you.”

Perhaps the worst part was that her Diamond’s words were true.
“Oh geez!” he exclaimed, voice full of worry. “Pearl, I didn't mean to say that!”

Even if he didn't mean to, it was certainly on his mind. Perhaps she really was no better than Yellow Diamond’s Pearl. “You are fine, My D-Steven.” she softly said, flipping through her drawings. It would do no good to show weakness. “Would you like to see more?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, Pearl,” Steven replied absentmindedly, mentally berating himself for his indiscretion. That couldn’t have exactly have helped Pearl’s issues. At all. It probably did a lot of damage, actually.

She nodded, pointing at the diminutive gem depicted on her screen. “This is a Morganite, a variant of the Beryl…”

OxOxO

Pearl approached Greg in the kitchen silently. It was the norm, really. A pearl had to do its best to be as little of a nuisance as possible.

“Greg, have you seen Steven?” she queried in barely a whisper. Being used to her soft voice, he didn't need to ask her to repeat herself. They knew each other well. Well enough that Greg knew that something was wrong, and that it would do no good to ask.

He cracked a smile, pointing out the window onto the sprawling field. It was a sea of green. “He’s outside mowing the lawn, if you’re looking for him. Steven summoned his weapon on accident by looking at a photo of his mother! He, um, nearly took my head off by accident, but, still, pretty cool, right?”

At first, she didn't believe it. But sure enough, when she glanced outside, Steven was frolicking about their field of a lawn, cutting grass down like enemy Gems. For most things, she would remain silent. Not this.

“He's using it to cut weeds?” she asked, incredulous. “Countless Gems have fallen to that weapon, and he's using it cut weeds?”

“Yeeeeeess? It's just a tool.” Greg answered, rubbing the back of his head.

Pearl began to fidget. “That’s- what- I- no, no no.” She took a deep breath, attempting to calm herself.

It didn’t work. “HOW DARE HE DISRESPECT MY DIAMOND LIKE THAT?!” she shrieked, exposing her fiery eyes.

The man reeled back, chuckling nervously. “Hey, um, Pearl. Relax! I mean, at least he’s not using it as a backscratcher.” Greg took another look out the window. “...I guess he is now, though.”

This didn't make- no, no, no- he was just-

It wasn’t real.

Pearl catapulted awake. It was a dream, but a nightmare to her. Her normally lightly tousled hair was flat out messy, and her needless breathing was a gasping pant. The blue gem brushed her hair out of her eyes, glancing around. Pearl could not recall falling asleep. Normally, she did so every week or so. It was very beneficial to be at peak efficiency as a servant to her Diamond, and sleep helped regulate her energy cycles.
All was dark in the palanquin. Pearl was curled into a ball in the corner. She traced a finger over her eyelids. They were damp with salty tears, and everything came back to her.

Pearl had cried herself to sleep once again. How shameful, she thought. Had Steven seen her? Had Greg heard her?

She resumed her sobbing, the sting of Steven’s words at the forefront of her mind. How pitiful. Pearls weren’t even supposed to have feelings. She wasn’t as bad as Yellow Pearl, she was as defective as the renegade.

Pearl sobbed until dawn. As the sun rose over the horizon, she pulled herself to her feet, wiped the tears from her eyes, and combed the worst tangles out of her hair. After all, it was improper for her master to see her as anything less than perfect.
Contrary to popular belief, there was a lot of effort put into cheesy pop songs. Not artistic effort, though. Intellectual effort. Entire R&D teams slaved day and night arguing on the precise beat, melody, and lyrical combination that was necessary to make a song stick in a subject’s head for weeks and make them more likely to buy merch. Haven’t You Noticed is considered to be the standard that all the other teams were held to. It was a masterwork, guaranteed to stay in the subject’s mind for weeks at a time from a single listen.

As a consequence, Haven’t You Noticed tended to pop up in the subject’s mind at rather inappropriate times, as per the “Purple Elephant” principle. So Steven found himself humming the lyrics and swaying his hips to the beat while preparing for a potentially deadly Crystal Gem mission. He stuffed a container of sunscreen into the lettuce, then found himself unable to resist the product of several years’ worth of experimentation, five million dollars in funding, and testing upon questionably acquired homeless people. “HAVEN’T YOU NOTICED I’M A STAR, I’M COMING INTO VIEW AS THE-” he belted out, then noticed Pearl flinching. “Oh, um, heh. Sorry, Pearl. Didn’t mean to startle you there.”

“It is quite all right, my Diamond. Is all this necessary for a simple retrieval mission..?” Pearl asked, holding the backpack open for her Diamond. She then berated herself for forgetting yet another time that her Diamond was not… quite like other Gems. Other Gems, for instance, had no need for granola bars, lengths of rope, and security blankets.

“You never know!” Steven said, shrugging. “This mission might need all sorts of things. Like a grappling hook! Hey, do we have a grappling hook? Rose Quartz said it was important, too.”

“I do not believe so, my Diamond.” Pearl pursed her lips. Unlike her Diamond, memories of the war were still fresh in her mind, and she could not forgive the Crystal Gems of their atrocities so easily. Except perhaps for Amethyst. Pearl didn’t believe that the little Quartz was innocent of war crimes. Her short stature was not only indicative of subpar Kindergartening, but also showed that she most likely emerged after the war.

Besides, Amethyst treated Steven with respect. Never once had she shown any ill will towards Pearl’s Diamond. Pearl, throughout her service in her Diamond’s court, had learned to separate the true loyalists from the blustering toadies. She could tell that Amethyst’s camaraderie was not faked.

“Are you nearly finished? Is there anything I can do to assist you..?” Pearl whispered.

Steven wriggled into his navy blue hoodie, slinging his backpack over his shoulder before parting the curtains. He looked back at Pearl with a bright smile on his face. “Nope! Let's go!”

Pearl sedately followed after her charge as Steven bounced down the hill and into town. If there was one thing that Pearl could compliment about Beach City, it was the pleasurable mix of cool breeze and warm sunshine that led the creation of the perfect median temperature. As they walked through the village, Steven waved to everyone he recognized, and quickly shuffled past those he didn’t. They
jogged past the boardwalk, and all of its delicious smells wafting from the concessions tempted
Steven for a few moments before he mustered all of his willpower to walk past them. It was a
pleasant day, and Steven fervently hoped that not all of it was to be wasted in a dark dungeon.

In almost no time at all, they reached the Temple, where the Crystal Gems were waiting at the Warp
Pad. “You're finally here,” the other Pearl said curtly. Steven sauntered straight past her and
approached Amethyst, a goofy grin on his face. With pomp and ceremony, the two fistbumped. Rose
Quartz didn’t even bother to hide her giggling at the two’s antics.

Garnet cleared her throat and adjusted her visor. Crossing her arms, she said, “Rose, continue the
briefing.”

“Right,” Rose started. “Garnet has located the Geode Beetles of Heaven and Earth.”

“That sounds cool.” Steven attempted to whisper to Pearl. It came out far more loudly than he
intended. The white Pearl shot Steven a glare and was about to unleash an ungodly tongue-lashing
on him, but a warning look from Rose stopped Pearl in her tracks. She simply harrumphed and
crossed her arms, focusing her attention on the brief.

“We are going to split up into teams to retrieve these monsters,” Rose announced.

Other Pearl stepped close to Rose Quartz. “Shall we depart, then? I assume I’ll be going with-”

Garnet sighed, interrupting Pearl. “We’re going in three groups. I will retrieve the Earth Beetle alone.
It is located at the bottom of a boiling lava lake, and I doubt that any of you can survive being
dunked in a well of molten rock. Rose is going by herself to the Strawberry Battlefield to retrieve the
containment unit for the Beetles. That leaves you four,” she said, gesturing towards the Pearls,
Amethyst, and Steven. “to go after the Heaven Beetle at the Sky Spire.”

While the white Pearl wordlessly spluttered, Garnet, then Rose warped away to their respective
destinations.

After recovering from her shock, the other Pearl followed stepped onto the Warp Pad. “Follow my
lead…” she grumbled, glaring daggers at Steven who utterly failed to notice her animosity.

“As you wish…” Pearl whispered, her tone carrying an undercurrent of snark. The other Pearl
bristled, but said nothing else.

Steven and Amethyst looked at each other nervously, then stepped on the Warp Pad with the Pearls.
The shorty squad gulped in unison as the Warp Stream engulfed them.

Spiraling cyan light surrounded the group, and in an instant they were at their destination. Steven
slammed onto the ground forcefully. “I’m okay!” he said, his voice muffled as he gave a thumbs up.
Amethyst, laughing, helped Steven to his feet.

“Woah…” Steven whispered, his eyes sparkling as he took in his surroundings. A bright sun,
unimpeded by the clouds that drifted below the group, shone upon a sparkling mountainous forest,
crumbling yet elegant stone ruins marking a path to their destination. The air was brisk and thin, and
Steven couldn’t shake an odd feeling of deja vu.

“Wow, so, that's where the Heaven Beetle lives?” Steven queried, pointing to a small building atop
the highest visible peak.

“Yes, it is,” the other Pearl said, her tone sharp. “Now let's get moving.”
The four gems began hiking towards the Sky Spire, the white Pearl in front, Amethyst taking up the rear while amiably chatting with the boy, and Pearl and Steven in the middle.

An odd thought drifted into Steven’s mind, brought on partially by curiosity but mostly boredom. “Hey, Pearl, if you and Pearl fused, would that make a bigger Pearl?”

“Yes, my Diamond,” Pearl explained. “But that would never be necessary, and be quite improper besides.”

The white Pearl whipped around, scowling fiercely. “It doesn't matter, because that would never happen! I wouldn't ever fuse with either of you.”

“Yeesh, P.” Amethyst said, raising an eyebrow. “Little harsh, don'tcha think? What have they done to you?”

Flustered and sputtering, other Pearl folded her arms. “I am a Crystal Gem, and they are Homeworld loyalists! Continue to forget that, and we won't ever form Opal.”

Amethyst frowned. “Well-”

“Guys! Guys!” Steven exclaimed excitedly. “Who is Opal?!”

The purple Quartz smirked. She relaxed slightly, taking a smug stance. “Opal’s me and Pearl fused together and junk. She's an ultra powerful, stone cold Betty- that part's me. And she's like, kinda tall- that part's Pearl.”

“It's not quite that simple, Amethyst,” the other Pearl snapped. “Now let's keep moving.”

Pearl let out a long-suffering sigh. When she was certain the petty quarrel was over, she spoke. “Do not raise your voice to Steven that way again.”

Other Pearl’s eye twitched. She spun around to face her counterpart and jabbed a finger in her face. Pearl stared the renegade in the eyes, unflinching.

“I don't get it! I really don't. You've been free for over a decade!” Pearl exclaimed.

Pearl narrowed her eyes beneath her bangs. “Where are you going with-”

“You don't have to listen to him!” she roared, pointing to Steven. “You're on Earth, you can do anything you could possibly want! You could even kill yourself and have another abomination like that if you wanted!”

Amethyst and Steven stepped away. They could feel the chill emanating from the blue Pearl.

“Would you kindly repeat that?” Steven’s Pearl said, her voice as cold as the void of space. For the first time that Steven could recall, her voice was raised above a whisper.

Despite the brisk air, the sweat beaded at the white Pearl’s brow. Her eyes went wide and she slumped. “No, I- I didn't mean to say that, I-”

Pearl turned her nose upward, her glassy eyes barely peeking out from her periwinkle hair. Other Pearl’s pupils contracted as she reeled backwards, away from her counterpart’s frozen fury.

The blue Pearl’s voice was steel, rising to a terrifying conversational volume. “I chose to stay, and listen to my Diamond. I am free on Earth, and I choose to aid my Diamond in his endeavors, whatever they may be. She offered me her ship, eternal freedom to do what I choose, and I chose
this. Perhaps freedom isn't just sniveling at the skirts of a tittering war criminal like she's the Diamond that cast you away like the filth you are.”

“G-guys… please, stop fighting…” Steven sobbed, clutching his shirt. “G-Gems shouldn't fight each other like this… I can’t stand it…” In an instant and a flash of blue, the rest of his group began crying as well.

Pearl braced herself as the wave of energy hit her. Over the years, she had grown accustomed to Blue Diamond’s outbursts. In truth, it was relieving to know that, for once, the bitter, crushing sadness was not coming from within. The others, however, were not so prepared.

“What is this?!” the white Pearl cried, trying to stop the flow.

“That's so beautiful!” Amethyst blubbered.

Steven shook his head, composing himself. The tears ceased as he pursed his lips. “Can we stop arguing? Even if you don't like us, we have a mission.”

Pearl grunted in annoyance, striding ahead of the group. “Fine!”

Amethyst dried her eyes, staring at her damp fingers. Her job, such as it was, was inherently weird. But this day managed to clear her official Threshold of Super Weird. Shrugging, she followed the rest of the group.

OxOxO

It had taken them hours filled with nothing but furious silence, but the Gems arrived at the Sky Spire. Certainly not as majestic as it’s ocean counterpart, Steven noted, although it was still beautiful in its own understated way.

“It's just where Garnet said it would be. The Heaven Beetle should be inside.” Other Pearl said curtly as she emerged from the stairway into the sun.

All sorts of obstacles had stood in their way. They had braved shallow streams, hopped across floating rocks, and dodged deadly goats. Steven’s mangled sleeve was evidence of that encounter.

Steven stepped outside, giggling uncontrollably upon the sight of their target. “It's a tiny temple!” he wheezed, spying the small structure on the platform. He knelt to peer inside it. “Check it out, it's even got a little beetle bedroom, and little beetle bongos, and a little beetle baby book!”

Other Pearl did the same, scrutinizing the Heaven Beetle’s home. “But where's the beetle? It's supposed to be here, the Heaven Beetle wouldn't leave, would it? Oh, it could be anywhere!” she despairedly, nearly tearing out clumps of her hair.

“Why don't we continue panicking,” Pearl mocked, leaning against the wall. “That seems to be working.” She allowed herself the indulgence of a smirk.

“Complaining about me won't do anything either, Toy,” the white Pearl snapped, throwing her counterpart a piercing glare over her shoulder.

Steven and Amethyst stepped outside as the two servants began to bicker. “Geez. Sorry, Ste-man.” Amethyst said, wincing as the two continued to bicker. “They just won't get along.”

“I'm sorry too. I didn't know Pearl had a mean bone in her body. I don't know what my mom did, but Pearl and Garnet won't like me.” Steven sadly said. “I'm not even doing anything wrong. Normally
everyone likes it when you're nice to them.” He turned to her, shrugging. “Why do you stand me?”

“I have nothing against you.” Amethyst mumbled. “I mean, you're a goofy kid. I'm a goofy gem, so I guess we get along. You're pretty fun, you know. I think if they tried actually hanging out with you, with no… uh, bias? I think they wouldn't be so weird.”

Steven smiled fondly at Amethyst, then spotted a grazing goat, happily enjoying some grass not twenty feet away. He was about to point it out to his friend when a gigantic bird-like creature swooped down and swallowed the animal whole.

Amethyst scooped the boy up, scrambling into the Sky Spire. “IT ATE A POOR GOAT!” Steven screamed as he flailed in panic.

“First no Beetle, now this?!” the other Pearl exclaimed, pushing everyone to the far end of the structure. Luckily, it seemed as if danger had temporarily extinguished the feud. They breathed a collective sigh of relief until they heard the bird hammering the roof of the dome with its massive beak.

“You guys should fuse! Opal, big Pearl, I don't care!” Steven exclaimed, pupils dilated as he backed further away from the beast. “We need to beat this thing! Kill it, kill it with fire! Or magic, or water, or SOMETHING!”

“I'm not fusing with any of you!” Other Pearl harrumphed.

Steven’s jaw dropped. “ Seriously? Seriously? You're still arguing when there is a huge monster trying to kill us?! If you can't get along with each other, I might never get to see your awesome fusion powers. And I might get eaten by a giant bird!”

Just then, the ceiling crumbled under the incessant pecking of the giant bird. It opened its mouth and swallowed the cheerful boy whole.

Steven tumbled through the innards of the monstrosity. The fleshy bowels of the thing were wet, and smelled like wet towels made of dog fur and covered in urine. When he emerged into its stomach, he nearly vomited.

The stomach was lined with gem shards and filled with mounds of garbage piled high. He saw a goat atop one of the taller ones, its pose suggestive of a conquering hero. Steven hauled himself to his feet, nearly tripping over a goat skull. That was when he saw something shining in the living goat’s mouth.

Steven climbed a mountain of junk, idly drawing comparisons between the monster’s innards and Amethyst’s room. “Now what do we have-” Steven muttered, kneeling to inspect what was caught in the goat’s teeth. “Aha! That’s where you are!” The Heaven Beetle, still pristine despite the goat’s slobber, was clamped firmly between the ill-tempered animal’s teeth. Steven grasped the Beetle within the mouth of the goat and began a rather absurd game of tug of war with the animal. “Come on, Goat! I need this thing right now!” he grunted.

The bird shook, and the momentary distraction loosened the goat’s grip on the Beetle. Steven snatched the golden bug from the literal jaws of defeat, then let out a surprised yelp as he fell off the garbage heap, clutching onto the Beetle for dear life.

That was when a hand sprouted up from the floor. Well, the bird monster’s stomach, if Steven wanted to be specific about such things. So naturally, as one would do if a blue limb burst from the floor, Steven screeched at the top of his lungs and ran around in circles as more arms appeared.
Despite his best efforts and millions of years of an engineered fight or flight response, a blue hand managed to grasp Steven’s leg, and tore the bird monster’s stomach apart as it gently pulled him down.

Pearl blankly stared where Steven once was. Amethyst slapped her hard in the face. Then again, when that didn’t work. She was winding up for a third time when Pearl came to her senses. “B.P! Come on, focus!” Amethyst ordered.

“My Steven!” Pearl cried, touching her face where the Quartz had slapped her.

“Let’s fuse!” Amethyst suggested. “Come on!”

“F-Fuse!?” Pearl whispered, her voice dripping with disbelief. The very idea sent waves of revulsion throughout her projection. Other Pearl could only watch with her mouth agape.

“Trust me! Agh, why are Pearls so useless when shale like this happens?!” Amethyst grumbled through grit teeth. It’s not like she was smelly or something! Well, sometimes, at least. She was far less disgusting than her room, at least.

Amethyst steeled her gaze, looking up at Pearl. She rested a hand on her shoulder “We’re gonna save him, Pearl.”

Pearl stared at Amethyst with desperate hope in her eyes. Amethyst could see her tears running down her face.

“Promise.” Amethyst reassured her.

Their gems started to glow as they synchronized.

“For Steven.” BP said.

“Yeah, for the Ste-man!” Amethyst cheered

Amethyst prepared herself for a dance, but as soon as she grasped Pearl’s hand, they merged their light into one. All of their actions were in sync. They were a fusion, and she felt powerful.

The white Pearl looked up at the ten foot tall, lavender-skinned gem with wide eyes. She had four arms, and half as many eyes. Much like the Pearl’s, it was incredibly messy. Amethyst being a half of her certainly didn’t help tidiness. Her was made up of of Pearl’s leotard, a sash around the waist, and tights with holes in the knees like Amethyst’s.

She was like a punk ballerina.

The white Pearl’s gem felt a twinge of pain to see Opal again, except as an outsider. She was so similar, yet so… different.

“W-who… are you?” Pearl softly asked, reaching up as if to touch the Fusion’s face. She desperately hoped that she was wrong, that this was someone else. She and that… that toy couldn’t be so similar, could they?

Her voice was a contradiction: soft and polite, but with a touch of cocky self-assurance that could only be Amethyst. “We’re Opal too, sis. Now get out of my way, I’ve got a kid to save.”

Opal leapt into the air after the bird, the twin gems on her chest glowing. She latched on to the bird’s
underside, impaling the bird with her bare arms with cool grace. The monster screeched and squawked, swerving wildly in the air. Opal continued to reach inside the bird, and eventually, she felt something. Something distinctly squishy. Opal ripped her arm out of the bird, Steven in hand, and kicked off, diving towards the ground. Steven looked up at her in awe, eyes shining. Opal winked in return.

Landing smoothly on the platform, they watched as the bird exploded, its dust obscuring the sun for a few moments. After a few moments, the smoke cleared, revealing a swarm of hundreds of beaks, all flying towards the group.

“What are you?!”

“Opal.” Opal grabbed Pearl and Steven, backflipping off the high peak and smoothly sliding down the stairway that had taken them hours to climb. In a single bound, she crossed the chasm that had proved perilous when Steven nearly fell off one of the few floating platforms, and she gracefully landed right next to the Warp Pad. “Stay low, kiddo. I’ve got this.” she said as she set the two of them down, summoning Pearl’s rapier and Amethyst’s whip. In a flash of light, the two weapons fused into a pair brutal spiked chains, with a massive blade at each of the tips. They shined in the light of the sun, seeming to even cut the air with their very presence.

She leaped into the air, spinning like a top. The chains became a deadly whir, annihilating dozens of the birds each second. Opal disappeared for a moment in the mist caused by the birds’ destruction. In a few moments, they were all destroyed, and Opal floated back down to the ground.

He looked up at her familiar eyes. Steven could easily make out and recognize the hexagonal and round gems as Amethyst and Pearl. The boy shrank back slightly. “Uh... do you... know who I am?”

Opal gave a slight smile. “Of course I do, Steven.” In a blink of an eye, she burst back into two Gems. Pearl unabashedly embraced Steven, forcefully putting aside all of her qualms. She had already fused with a quartz today, so why not break another dozen rules?

“That was amaaaaaaaaaaaaaaazing!” Amethyst wheezed, leaning on her knees as she caught her breath. “Dude, that was way more fun than fusing with other Pearl. You’re really cool, you know that?” Pearl blushed.

Other Pearl approached them, nodding, even as jealousy raged within her gem. “Yes. Good work, I suppose,” she said stiffly. “But... what about the Beetle?”

Steven pulled said Heaven Beetle from his hoodie pocket, presenting it to her. “Now can we be friends?”

The white Pearl took it wordlessly. “Let’s just go back...” she grumbled.

OxOxO

Steven sat on the edge of his bed, looking over to his father’s sleeping space across the Palanquin. Greg was out late that night, so it was Pearl’s duty to prepare her Steven for bed. “Wow.” he breathed, recalling all the events of the day. Steven believed that was the best summary he could possibly give.

Pearl, who was standing nearby with her hands clasped, craned her neck to the side. “Steven?”

“I can’t believe you hugged me first.” he said happily, rubbing the back of his head. He blushed in happiness. “Pearl, I always have to start hugs.”
“I… I thought I had lost you.” she said, her voice quavering with emotion.

“I’m made of tough stuff.” he assured her.

Pearl nodded. “That was… excellent work today with the Beetle, Steven.”

He nodded. “Thanks, and thanks for fusing. Man, Blue Opal was so powerful. And cool! Did you see all of those flips and parkour stuff she did?”

“Indeed. That was my first time fusing with someone who wasn't a Pearl,” she quietly admitted. A slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. As much as she was loathe to admit it, she enjoyed the experience.

“Well, I can tell that made you happy. Ruby and Sapphire… They're girlfriends, right?” Steven queried.

Pearl nodded. “I… cannot really judge them, I suppose. My Diamond fell in love as well…”

“That's nice,” he yawned. “You think they'll adopt a bunch of orphan Gems or something?”

Pearl smirked slightly. Orphan gem? What a novel concept.

“It is time for your rest.” she whispered, turning the bedside lamp off. “Good night, Steven.”

He yawned, stretching his jaw to its limit. “Night Pearl! I love you!”

“I… love you too.”
Double Vision

Chapter Summary

Steven takes a good long look at himself.

This time, Steven managed to avoid falling flat on his face as the Warp Stream dropped them at their destination. Pumping his fists in silent victory, he stepped off the Warp Pad with Pearl and the rest of the Gems, his eyes wide as he drank in the Sea Temple.

A dizzying display of timepieces made up the bulk of the Temple, hourglasses of every shape and size covering long tables and standing solemnly in corners, casting inky black shadows across the floor. And then there were the windows.

Steven rushed to the nearest one, gluing his face close to the glass to watch the sea floor in wonder. Towers of coral spiraled up towards the surface, creatures skittered on the rock, and he could see a volcano rumbling in the far distance. Pearl followed her charge closely, as she always did, and gently pried him away from the beautiful view. Shaking his head, Steven glanced around at a shelf of hourglasses. “Hey! How about this one here?” He gestured to the smallest of them all, a spherical hourglass.

“Which one?” Other Pearl asked, her voice dripping with disdain, then glanced to where Steven was pointing. “Oh. No, of course not. It can’t be that tiny. It would be beautiful and grand. Like this one!” she said emphatically, sweeping her arms to an intricate hourglass arranged in a spiraling pattern.

Garnet folded her arms, walking up to the largest one. “I think it’s this one.”

Steven raised an eyebrow. “Can’t you use your future vision to see which one is the right one?”

The fusion simply shrugged.

Steven appraised Garnet’s hourglass. “How would you even get that back to the Warp Pad?”

Garnet cracked her knuckles. “I can carry it,” she assured him.

Rose put a hand on Garnet's shoulder to stop her from lifting the hourglass, panic in her eyes. “Wait! We need to be careful which one we touch. Do you remember what happened last time we were here?”

“What happened?” Steven said, cocking his head to one side.

Amethyst moved over to perhaps the oddest hourglass, a mess of twists, turns and dead ends. “Hey, guys. I’m making the call,” she picked it up casually, “And it’s this janky one here!”

“Amethyst!” Other Pearl shrieked.

Steven laughed nervously as the building began to shake and quiver, cracks beginning to form in the windows to the sea. “Welp, I guess it wasn't it,” Amethyst said, waltzing back to the Warp Pad as the columns holding
the ceiling up began to crumble into dust. Water began to leak into the Sea Shrine.

Rose Quartz turned to Steven. “Stop the water, hurry!”

“What?” he asked, his voice quivering slightly. “H-how?”

“You have hydrokinesis, stop the water!” Rose shouted.

Steven looked down at the water at his feet, dubious. He pushed himself to his limit, willing the water to stop with all the power of his mind. Using all of his might, he pushed the water back… all of a few inches away from his boots.

Garnet growled, hoisting both Pearls over her shoulder despite their protests. “There’s no time! We have to leave now!”

Pearl finally managed to squirm her way out of Garnet’s grip and give the fusion a glare, but her annoyance was quickly forgotten when she saw Steven charging out into the Temple. “My Diamond! You must return immediately, or-”

“Relax, Pearl!” he chirped, grabbing something before running back. “I’m picking a glass! Amethyst’s keeping hers!”

“Darn tootin’!” Amethyst replied, stretching out her arm to pick him up and tossing him onto the Warp Pad.

Rose Quartz activated the Warp Pad in the nick of time. Thousands of gallons of water crashed into the Sea Temple in, the sea’s deafening roar muffled by the Warp Stream.

When the six reached the Temple, all of them stood stock-still, shaken by the experience of almost being trapped thousands of feet beneath the surface. Steven was the first to break the silence, proudly declaring, “Well, gang, I’d say we all did a-”

The Warp Pad flashed once again, delivering hundreds of gallons of water directly above the group. For a moment reminiscent of Eccentric Toons, the mass simply hung in the air. Then it dropped onto the six of them, enveloping the group in the crushing grip of the ocean for a few fearful moments before washing out into the ocean.

Amethyst ran to the shoreline, hacking up a flounder.

Steven tucked the hourglass into his hoodie pocket, and swept his wet hair out of his eyes. “Hot potato! We’re doing that again right?”

“No,” Pearl said firmly.

Rose twisted her curly ringlets, wringing the water out of it. “Unfortunately, not soon. Not unless you live to be over a hundred.” Anxiety flared up in Pearl’s chest.

“We’re going to have to wait that long because somebody couldn’t keep their hands to themselves! AGAIN!” Other Pearl exclaimed, glaring daggers at Amethyst.

Amethyst wiped away some holographic bile from the corner of her mouth. “Sorry!” She sniggered, taking a closer look at the white Pearl. “And, um, Pearl? You have a lobster on your butt!” The other Gem screeched, frantically swatting at the crustacean while Amethyst chuckled at the display.

The alarm on Steven’s Deluxe Cookie Cat Survival Watch rang began to meow. “Beachapalooza!”
Steven exclaimed, slapping his forehead. “I’ve gotta go get Dad!”

“What on Earth is that?” Rose asked, curious.

The boy turned around, sprinting backwards away from the temple. “It's a big party and I have to go set up and if you guys want to come come on over to the boardwalk later tonight!”

“We’ll be there!” Rose replied.

Garnet looked to her, quirking an eyebrow from behind her glasses. “We will?”

OxOxO

Pearl insisted that Steven had to change before visiting his father, and the boy reluctantly acquiesced. Now dry and in a red shirt, Steven burst out of the Palanquin, Pearl following behind him, now dry as well. Towels were such a wonderful invention. Although they did not erase the fishy smell. Shampoo and conditioner were wonderful human creations as well. Even though gem hair and bodies didn't degrade and decompose, it felt... nice to have soft hair that had a pleasant scent.

Steven hummed the Cookie Cat jingle as he and Pearl rushed towards to the car wash. They both stopped short when they saw the rather unfortunate scene that was playing out. Greg and Yellowtail stood in front of the car wash, appraising the situation. “Yep,” the sunburnt man said.

“Mnhmmm.” the fisherman nodded.

“Hey dad, you ready to- whoa!” Steven exclaimed.

Pearl cupped her hands over her mouth. “Oh my.”

“Uhhh... we're having a bit of a day.” Greg mumbled, gesturing towards the roof. There was a boat lodged in the entrance of the wash.

“How did you even… nevermind,” Pearl sighed, shaking her head. As wonderful a man that Greg was, he was occasionally incredibly thick.

“Is your performance cancelled?” Steven asked, scuffing the concrete with his sneakers in an effort to appear more pitiful.

“Sorry buddy, I don't think I can plan the concert tonight. I gotta deal with this.” Greg told him, sighing. “There’s always next year.”

Steven nodded in understanding. “That sucks. The whole town is gonna be there, and they love you!”

“Well they love you!” Steven exclaimed.

Greg chuckled, ruffling his son's hair. “I love you!”

Steven giggled, walking away with Pearl. His mood quickly worsened. “It's terrible that the car wash has a boat on it now.”

“I've never seen anything like it...” Pearl said, smirking ever-so-slightly.

Steven sighed. “I wish I could go back earlier today and tell my dad the boat was too fat.”
Pearl was about to reply when Steven tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. As soon as he recovered from his fall, he was struck in the back by something hard. He fell forward once again, winded. “Aw, come on!”

An incredibly familiar voice spoke up. “Oh my gosh, are you-” then they gasped.

Steven did the same, gasping loudly as well. Standing over him, was… him. Only, this Steven’s eyes were brown, and his hair darker and more curly. Rose Quartz curly.

“Are you me?!” both Stevens exclaimed in unison.

Steven pulled the round hourglass form his jean pocket, glad it hadn't been crushed in the scooter crash. “Wow! The time thing worked, I gotta tell Pearl!”

The shorter Steven gasped. “Wait, are you future me?! You gotta tell me, when do I get diamond and blue eyes and light hair?!” he begged.

He raised a brown eyebrow. “I've always had them... Is this a timeline where you didn't get mom’s features?”

“Mom had curly hair, and my color eyes.” Steven said slowly.

The pieces began to fall into place. “Wait, who was your mom?”

The words that came out of his counterpart's mouth shocked him to the core. “Rose Quartz…?” the boy said confusedly. He couldn't understand why HE was asking an obvious question.

“Ruh roh,” Steven mumbled,

“What's uh oh?” Other Steven asked, cocking his head to one side in a manner all too familiar.

“Steven, I’m from an alternate timeline where my mom is a different Gem,” he explained, choosing his words carefully.


He decided to play it smart, recalling how… violence-y, how apprehensive the Crystal Gems were upon their first meeting. “Uh, I guess you could say it was Pearl,” he half lied.

“Oh man, I can't imagine living without Pearl.” Steven softly said. “What's… what's mom like?”

Steven stood up, looking around. “Uh, Rose is... very nice to Pearl and I.” Steven clapped his hands to his mouth. “FORGET I SAID THAT!”

“Wait, I thought Pearl was… gone?” his counterpart queried.

“A different Pearl lives with us.” Steven stuttered. At least that was true. “Could you, um, show me to the Temple? I really need to get home. Does Dad do performances still in this timeline?”

Steven gasped. “We do! That's an emergency, come on!” he exclaimed, grabbing his blue counterpart's hand. He dragged him away, running toward the Crystal Gem Temple

“We?” Steven asked, quirking an eyebrow upward.

“Yeah! Don’t you play the ukulele?”
“Um…” Thankfully, Steven was saved from that awkward conversation when the two of them raced around the cliff to face the Temple. In front of the two of them was an unfamiliar, dinky cabin in place of the Warp Pad and the Temple door. “Huh?”

“What's wrong?” Steven asked frantically. “Is your house a different color?”

“There's no house here.” he replied. “Only a Warp Pad and a door!”

Steven chuckled, dragging him up the stairs. “Wow, your timeline really is different!”

Sure enough, when he flung open the screen door, three Gems were milling about the living room: Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. Garnet was near the Temple Door, and Amethyst and the white Pearl were seated on a white couch. Pearl momentarily looked up. “Hello, Steven. Back from…” She blinked rapidly upon seeing the two Stevens, then turned to Garnet, spluttering.

Amethyst’s eyes went wide. “And… Steven?”

Garnet’s arms fell slack as she stood at attention. “What the…”

“Hey guys, this is me!” Steven cheerily greeted, pointing to his blue eyed self.

Pearl stood up and glared daggers at the son of Blue Diamond. “What… how… of course, the Doppelganger Project!” In a blink of an eye, she summoned her elegant spear and leveled it at Steven. “You have ten seconds to prove that you’re Steven, monster.”

Steven laughed nervously. “My birthday is August Fifteenth, Greg is my dad, I love Cookie Cats, and you have a crush on Rose Quartz?”

“What?!” Steven exclaimed as Amethyst snickered. “Is ALL of that true?!”

Garnet looked at her palms, sighing. “Yeah, he's Steven.”

Blushing, Pearl continued to inspect the boy. “Why are your eyes blue?”

“His mom isn't my mom!” he mumbled. “Uh, can you guys promise you won't freak out? I just want to go home.”

Pearl and Garnet glanced at one another as Amethyst sidled up next to him. They scrutinized him. “Go ahead.” Garnet said, frowning, then muttered, “Why can’t I See..?” under her breath.

Steven gulped, pulling his collar down, exposing his gem. Immediately, Pearl and Garnet staggered backwards, summoning their weapons once more.

Amethyst looked at Pearl and Garnet, then at the Stevens, then back again. “Um, guys? What’s going on?”

“Mom was Blue Diamond. The Crystal Gem in my timeline freaked out too. I tried to ignore it, but they were really afraid of me for some reason. But, you guys have a Steven.” Steven pointed out. His expression was worried.
“Leave. Now,” Pearl growled, the tip of her spear glowing.

“Who's Blue Diamond?” Steven asked, his voice no longer filled with youthful glee.

“No one important.” Pearl lied, muttering. “I just don't understand! Whatever. Just get out of Steven’s room and leave us alone!” Fear shone in her eyes.

Steven began walking backwards, hands raised. “I can't understand how my dad fell in love with Rose Quartz! How did it happen here?”

“He came to play a concert on the beach, met her, and they fell in love!” Steven explained, stars in his eyes.

“Oh!” the other boy said snapping his fingers. “My dad left this town, and got pretty famous. He met my mom in Korea!”

“The Palanquin…” Pearl whispered. “Greg… got popular? That’s impossible!”

Steven blushed. “Just a little. Not like he was the Beatles. But they really like him overseas.”

“I just can't believe… Blue Diamond?!” Pearl exclaimed, shaking her head.

Garnet crossed her arms, dismissing her gauntlets. “It doesn’t matter. He needs to get home before he begins to catastrophically damage the timeline.”

Both of the Stevens pulled the time thing from their pockets and presented them to the Gems theatrically, which elicited similarly dramatic gasps from the three.

“You chose right!” Amethyst exclaimed, laughing triumphantly. “Right on, Ste-men!”

Steven smirked, getting an idea. He opened his blue eyes wide. “What if I just ask it to take me to right after I left?”

“The Glass of Time brought you to this timeline when you used it. There's no guarantee you can get back.” Garnet said. She adjusted her visor. “Ever.”

A dreary silence fell upon them. Steven gulped, holding out the orb. “It's worth a try, though. Bring me back to right after I left, in front of Pearl!”

With a glow of magic sparkles, the boy was outside. He looked around, hoping to see something familiar. Or, at least something exclusive to his timeline.

The blue Pearl was on the ground, hyperventilating and searching the concrete for him.

“Pearl, I'm fine! I'm right here!” he assured her, holding up the time thing. “Look, I chose the right one!”

She looked up slowly, her mouth agape. As soon as she realized he was back, she leapt up and embraced him tightly. Pearl’s tears were wet on his scalp. “Did you miss me?” he chuckled. “You wouldn't believe who I just met!”

Pearl sniffled, winning her salty tears away with the palm of her hand. She just couldn't believe her eyes. “W-who…?”

“Me!” he exclaimed. “Well, an alternate me. A Steven who's mom wasn't Blue Diamond!”
She knit her brows. Was it possible that Blue Diamond had actually gone through with her original plan? Had she talked Greg into letting her pearl become a surrogate?

In a way, she supposed she owed her life to Greg Universe. If he wasn't as kind, she would be a child right now. It, quite honestly, was a sobering thought about a Pearl’s place.

So, she was particularly frightened to inquire further. “Who was it?”

“Rose Quartz.” he revealed with a slight smile. His thoughts were obviously elsewhere, as shown by his longing gaze. “Can you believe it?”

“Yes.” Pearl said, sighing in quiet relief. “If your father had stayed here, he certainly would have fallen for Rose Quartz.”

“It’s crazy!” he exclaimed, waving his arms above his head in excitement. “And I think I can go back any time I want!”

“Please don’t…” she whispered, her voice quavering. “If you only listen to one of my requests, don’t do that again…”

Steven sighed. It would be so cool for him to hang out with other Stevens. Form a Legion of Super-Stevens! But… He couldn’t do that to Pearl. “Yeah, alright.”
Beach Summer Fun Buddies

Chapter Summary

Steven has some summer fun on the beach with his buddy.

Together, Garnet and Pearl had faced down ferocious monsters, obliterated armies of Homeworld soldiers as Sardonyx, and had in all shared too many fraught moments to count. But this was their greatest challenge yet by far.

Garnet and Pearl took a step towards Rose as she stood with her back to them, then another. Pearl glanced behind her, every instinct screaming for her to flee, but set her jaw and continued forward with Garnet. They all stood atop the cliff above the Temple, in front of the lighthouse. The cool sea air made them acutely aware of the sweat accumulating on their brows. The fusion and the former servant looked at each other. The white Pearl took a deep breath.

“What are you two doing here? I thought you two and Amethyst went looking for Snowflake,” Rose asked as she turned around, a hint of pain coming through her voice as she mentioned her fallen comrade.

“We… we couldn’t find her, Rose. I’m sorry. But… but that’s not what this is about.” Garnet took a moment to collect herself. “Pearl and I would like to know what you think you’re doing with… him,” Garnet said, her tone leaving no doubt as to whom she was referring to. “Please, Rose, I know he appears to be a child, but it’s insane to think that giving him access to the Temple and bringing him on crucial missions is a good idea.”

“He’s our enemy, Rose! Don’t you remember that?” the white Pearl added, conviction shining in her eyes.

“Steven isn’t Blue Diamond,” Rose said calmly. “He's something more, something great. Something extraordinary.”

“He could easily be a she. There’s no telling if we’ll be attacked by them! The Diamonds have lived for millions of years, they know how to play the long game better than anyone!” Pearl snapped, gesticulating wildly.

“He’s not and he won’t,” Rose told them, turning back towards the ocean. “You two have always trusted my intuition. Why is this any different?”

Garnet took a deep breath. “Rose, the boy has been evading my future vision for the past few weeks. Everything surrounding him is a blur. There are too many possibilities to count. For the first time in millennia I feel… vulnerable. A-and afraid. No matter how many times Sapphire- I mean, I- decide something about him, he completely changes Ruby’s- I mean, my- decisions. He frightens me,” the stoic Gem said, her voice quavering slightly.

“No, Garnet,” the Quartz shook her head. “You’re afraid of Blue Diamond. That is something he is not. I know it's hard for us Gems to change, but you'll have to accept the fact that he's a human boy. I… don’t have to have your foresight to know you'll come to terms with him eventually. I promise you will, Garnet.”
“Rose, I-” Garnet saw the iron in Rose’s eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, sighing. “Fine. I hope you’re right. I’ll… I’ll try to see the good in him myself, if I can’t trust Sapphy’s Future Vision.” Shaking her head, the fusion trod down the hill, leaving Pearl alone with Rose.

“There’s… there’s something else,” Pearl muttered, fidgeting.

“Yes, Pearl?”

She gulped. “I- we need to talk. About Greg,” Pearl said, struggling to remain calm. Her turquoise cheeks betrayed her stern expression.

Rose breathed a long, drawn-out sigh. “I was hoping we wouldn’t have to. But I suppose it’s for the best.”

“He’s-”

“I know, Pearl,” she interrupted. “This… is difficult. I was hoping that I could have a bit longer to find a good way to say it, but… I can’t do this anymore. We can’t do this anymore.”

Pearl could feel Rose’s blade piercing her chest. Her arms fell limp as she stared at the uncountable blades of grass swaying in the wind. “P-pardon?” she asked in barely a whisper.

“Pearl. My Pearl. You’re passionate, dedicated, loyal, my closest confidante. Those are only some of the hundreds of reasons I fell in love with you,” Rose told her, smiling. Pearl’s mind raced as she registered Rose’s words. “But… You live for me, not yourself. Stars, I’ve lost count of the number of times you nearly got shattered because you threw yourself in front of a blow that would’ve barely scratched me!” Rose’s voice had risen throughout her speech. She took a deep breath, trying and failing to calm herself. A single tear rolled down her cheek. “That isn’t love, that’s blind devotion! Willing servitude!

“Pearl, I’m so very sorry. I’m sorry that I’ve let you become more of a slave than you ever were to Homeworld. I’m sorry that I couldn’t see that your master’s mark hasn’t faded, even thousands of years after you were freed. I’m sorry I’ve ignored it, ignored what you were doing to yourself, for so long. I just… I can’t do this anymore. I can’t flip-flop between caring for you and going to some dashing human because I feel too guilty to dedicate my love wholly to you. Pearl, I just can’t do this anymore. I’m… I’m sorry. It’s over.”

Pearl had no words at first. She simply stuttered and blinked. She felt as if her Gem was about to crack, as if she was about to shatter into a million pieces. “I- I see,” she mumbled, regaining her composure. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Rose closed her eyes as she heard Pearl run away.

OxOxO

“Yeah-ha-ha!” Steven whooped, riding a wave onto the shore. The early morning sea was a great place to have fun, in his opinion. The waves were just high and strong enough to be like a rollercoaster, reminding Steven of all the times that Greg had taken him to water parks for his birthday.

Connie snickered, standing on the sandy beach in her yellow one-piece swimsuit. Steven also took steps to preserve his modesty, wearing bright green swim trunks. “That was a good one!”

He laid down on his back, staring up at her. “Yeah! I'm glad your mom said you could come to the
beach with me.”

“Well, I told her we had a very responsible adult supervising us,” Connie said, motioning to Pearl.

The blue gem was clinging to an inner tube, being tossed about by the choppy waves. She appeared as if she was holding her breath, with her inflated cheeks and frowning face. She wasn’t having fun, at the very least.

“Uh, if you don't like the water, you can get out!” Steven shouted over the roar of the waves, his brow crinkling in puzzlement. He couldn’t recall a time in all of his watery adventures where Pearl had expressed anything other than muted joy. But Connie had never been to the Ocean Town Memorial Water Park with him before, either. Steven pursed his lips.

As soon as the words left his mouth, she sprang to her feet and hurried out of the water. He didn't miss the look of disgust on her face as her toes squished in the wet sand. Pearl had foregone her skirt and slippers today in favor of attire similar to Connie’s. “My thanks.”

Steven sighed, frowning. “You don't have to do anything you don't like.”

“Yes, my Diamond,” she said.

He resisted sighing again. Steven couldn’t get Pearl to stop calling him that since… since that night. The situation felt hopeless to him.

Connie quickly broke the ensuing awkward silence. “Hey, why don't we get a snack or something?”

That’s the best idea I've heard today! Maybe some good grub’ll help me get the hang of my water powers,” Steven said, rolling over and standing up. He dusted the wet clumps of sand off of him as Pearl offered him a crisp, freshly-washed shirt, which he graciously accepted. “You coming, Pearl?” he asked as he pulled the shirt over his head.

Pearl nodded, falling in behind the children. “I do carry the currency, my Diamond,” she pointed out.

“So what sounds good, Connie?” Steven asked, jogging to catch up with his friend.

“Anything,” she said. “Well, anything as long as you don't tell my parents,” she added.

“Why, you dirty rapscallion!” Steven said, his voice full of mock indignance. Connie and the boy narrowed their eyes at each other, then began to giggle uncontrollably.

As the two continued to joke and talk, Pearl saw similar scenes, but with different actors, play out in her mind. If Connie’s hair was a little longer, and Steven far, far taller… She pushed the intrusive thoughts out of her mind, although they still left her frowning slightly and walking stiffly.

The girl walked up to Steven, whispering in his ear. “Is there something bothering Pearl?”

“Yes,” was his quiet reply.

“Why does she stick around if it just makes her sad?” she asked with a frown. “I feel badly for her.”

“I don't know,” he answered truthfully. “Maybe she…” He didn't want to say it.

“Maybe she's got a crush on your mom, like Mister Epnas from Spirit Morph!” Connie quietly exclaimed. “And she sticks around because of her love.”

“That would be so… sweet,” Steven said with a smile. But… no, that couldn’t be true. Could it?
That would be too tragic. Pearl wouldn't just stay with him because of that, right?

He turned around, waiting for Pearl to catch up. “My apologies, my Diamond…” she said with a bow.

“Pearl, did you love my mother?” he bluntly queried. Connie’s jaw dropped.

“Why, yes. The luminous Blue Diamond was the most merciful, wonderful, magical being in the universe,” Pearl whispered, clasping her hands.

“No,” Steven said. “Did you love her? Like she loved Dad,” he clarified.

Pearl sputtered like a dying automobile, her mouth falling open. “What? No! Such feelings would be highly inappropriate!”

“Gotcha. Sorry, Pearl, I'll drop it,” He said sheepishly, glancing at Connie. “Guess not.”

Pearl fell back, avoiding their conversation as her mind alternated between spinning itself dizzy and screaming. The group walked inside the Big Donut, Steven and Connie bounding in with pep in their step while Pearl followed behind, dazed. Sadie waved at the group, resting her head on her other arm. “Hey, guys. What can I get for you today?”

“Two donuts, please,” Steven said matter-of-factly. Lars emerged from the backroom, and his confidence dissipated. “Uh, a jelly filled raspberry and a Boston cream, please,” he muttered.

They got them quickly, Pearl paying for them with money from her gem a few moments and a gentle elbow jab after Steven prompted her. The trio stepped outside, and were immediately approached by a trio of teenagers.

The one with the red jacket and sunglasses, who Steven assumed was the mayor's son Buck, pointed at the boy. “That's an awesome bedazzle job.”

Steven glanced down at his Diamond, looking up and rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. “Uh, thanks. I… grew it myself.”

The teenagers, save for Buck, burst into snickering and giggles. Slapping her knee, the only girl in their group, Jenny, spoke up. “That is so funny!”

“Yeah, you're a real card, for a kid.” Sour Cream said in a complete monotone.

“Oh, um, thanks,” Steven quietly said. “I guess I'm a joker, huh?”

A smile finally crept onto Buck’s stoic visage as he began to chuckle. “That's some good wordplay. What's your name? I'm Buck, he's Sour Cream, and she's Jenny.”

His confidence slowly trickled in. “Uh, my name is Steven Universe, this is Connie and Pearl.” Pearl bowed slightly, and the girl waved.

Jenny gasped. “I just had the greatest idea! Why don't you three join us for a day out?!”

Steven began to twiddle his fingers. “M-maybe?”

Connie leaned in close, whispering in his ear. “Maybe we should go? It could be an adventure road trip. Like in Dogcopter: Reckoning?”

“Yeah, alright. I-it could be fun!” Steven said, nodding.
Pearl nervously fidgeted. “Oh, um-”

“No worries, Pearl,” Steven assured her. “You can stay if you don't want to come. In fact, I… order you to stay if you aren't interested?”

“I don't believe you should go with these strangers,” Pearl meekly told him, closing her eyes to avoid his gaze.

“Yeah, that's fair. We’re not exactly the least shady people in Beach City. And you’re just kids, no offense. Stranger danger and all that,” Buck said. “Alright. Have fun on your own. But, we should totally hang at some point. Later,” he said, offering them a wave. The children and Pearl watched as they entered the Fish Stew Pizza delivery car.

“Good choice.”

Steven and Connie turned around, jumping with fear. “G-Garnet! I didn't see you come up on us!” the boy exclaimed, holding a hand to his swiftly beating heart.

“I'm very quiet,” the fusion told them, her voice neutral with great effort on her part. “So, Bl- Steven, what are you doing today?”

“Can't you just use your future powers to find out?” Steven cheekily asked, poking a finger at her with a goofy smile.

Garnet adjusted her visor, frowning ever so slightly and folding her arms. “No.”

Steven pursed his lips. It was as if half the time Garnet was terrified of him, the other half she was stoic and uncaring. Fitting, he supposed, since she was a fusion. Many things had to be going on in her head, what with two people being in there.

“So, can we help you or something?” he asked, belatedly remembering his manners.

“I realized something,” Garnet said. “You and I are going to spend time until we're able to get along properly. Now, how can I join in on the fun?”

“You can't really force yourself to get along with us,” Steven said, taking note of the lingering hint of aggression. “Friendships take time and work to develop.” Steven’s words resonated within Garnet’s fiery and icy halves, even though the whole didn’t quite trust the boy.

“Yeah!” Connie added. “Steven and I have been hanging out for weeks. We didn't force ourselves to get along either. It just happened!”

Garnet sighed, considering the human child’s words as she argued with Ruby and Sapphire internally. “Fine, Blue- Steven. Let me know when you are willing to...” she searched for the proper word for a moment, “...hang out.” The trio watched as she stomped away, confusion the only thing on their minds.

“I… I will retrieve the groceries! Yes, we need groceries,” Pearl muttered to herself, scurrying away. She idly wondered if the universe itself was conspiring to keep her off balance.

“That was…” Steven began.

“Weird. Like, super weird. Is she like that all the time?” Connie finished.
“What, Pearl or Garnet?”

“Garnet.”

“Yeah, pretty much. She’s either super confusing or really twitchy around me,” Steven explained.

“So that was Garnet. She’s, um, a fusion, right?” Connie stated more than asked as soon as Pearl was away. She cocked her head at the boy. “It just doesn’t make sense that someone that scary is so afraid of you.”

“Nah, it’s not me she’s afraid of. She and Pearl - no, not my Pearl, wait, that was poor phrasing, sorry, the Crystal Gem Pearl - are usually very… weird when I’m around. You noticed she called me Blue?” Steven asked. The girl nodded. He grimaced. “I’m pretty sure what I used to be- my mom- is what they’re afraid of. Since I met the Crystal Gems, I just- Gah, nevermind. I don’t want to stress you out.”

“It’s okay, you can tell me,” Connie said, concern and curiosity in equal parts creeping into her voice. He shook his head. “I don’t want to lay something heavy on you. It’d be selfish of me.”

“No it’s not,” she said in response, a twitch of annoyance tugging at her mind summoned by how the boy seemed to mirror her in most aspects. Sometimes, it seemed that even discounting their shared shyness, that Steven lacked some necessary social skills. Which made sense when she thought about it, seeing as he was raised by a space rock and a rock star. Connie could force herself to be nice when it counted, but Steven had a tendency to retreat into his shell at even the slightest bit of negativity from strangers. He was such a kind and caring kid when you got to know him, but… that was just it. Getting to know him was a near impossible feat. Connie probably would’ve never befriended Steven had he not chosen to swallow his fear and talk to her himself. Not that she was complaining. “Steven, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t let you vent to me?”

Steven smiled wanly, looking down at the sand. “Uh, if you’re sure. I just can’t stop getting this feeling that my mom was something more than what I’ve heard from Pearl and my dad. Not necessarily something… good.”

Connie paused, taking a moment to analyze his words. “Steven, you’re not your mom. You’re you, and you’re perfect. I know that everybody’s expecting you to grow up to be like her and take up her legacy and some junk, but that’s just not you! Which goes double if she wasn’t all that she’s cracked up to be, because you’re the kindest, friendliest, warmest, happiest person I know. It has to be really hard, but I’ll always be here for you. Always.”

Both children’s cheeks reddened. “Thanks Connie. That really-”

“GET DOWN!” Garnet roared, shoving them both into the sand. She very shortly joined them, pinning the children to the ground.

Steven peeked his head up just in time to see a roaring jet of water sail over their heads, slamming onto the boardwalk right where they’d been standing. “OH GEEZ!” he exclaimed as shards of wood exploded in all directions. “We almost got power washed!”

“Don’t move!” Garnet ordered, rushing toward the water, where the tendrils of some blue monster whipping the surface into a frothing frenzy. The fusion grabbed a tentacle, dragging the beast to the sandy beach. Steven was expecting something like a kraken, maybe a giant snake. But the water bear was far more terrifying than anything his imagination could bring to bear.

Just as Garnet was winding up for an earth-shattering punch, the water bear moved its gelatinous
mass with frightening swiftness to capture Garnet with its stubby appendages.

The two children were paralyzed with fear for the eternity of a few seconds, unable to do anything but watch as Garnet struggled within the beast’s body. Then, Connie’s eyes lit up. “It's made of water!” Connie shouted.

It took a moment for Steven to process her words. “No, no, no! That won’t work! I can't use my hydro-whatsit yet, I can't even make a splash!”

“You did it once! I know you can do it again! How many times does someone's untapped well of power come to the surface in a moment of dire need in shounen?!” Connie rebutted.

“All the time!” he screamed. “BUT I’M NOT CAPTAIN LAZER X!”

“GET OUT OF THE WATER!” Garnet yelled, ripping her head free for a few moments before it was enveloped by the beast once again.

Connie locked her gaze with Steven. “Please! You have to try!”

Steven shook his head for a moment, then set his mouth in a firm line. He clapped his palms together and forcefully tore them away from each other, the air feeling like hardening cement. To his shock, monstrosity, after a moment of resistance, collapsed, Garnet and its gem dropping beneath the waves. The boy laughed triumphantly. “Woah, I did it! I did it! I’m Captain Lazer X!”

Garnet surfaced, bubbling the gem away casually. “If you two had taken your feet away from the water, I could've electrocuted it and finished it sooner.” Despite her efforts to remain calm, irritation shone through her neutral tone.

“But he killed it!” Connie exclaimed, pumping her fists into the air. “Anime saved the day!”

The fusion scoffed, shaking her head in annoyance. Garnet charged past them, rushing towards the Temple. Steven couldn't help but notice her footsteps left small flames in her wake. “You should listen to me!” she grumbled over her shoulder.

“That was so cool!” Connie said, eyes shining. “Do you have any idea the kind of utility your powers could have? Heck, the human body is- wait, forget I said that. Bloodbending leads to the dark side.

Now that he was out of immediate danger, Steven’s anxiety flared up once more. “I just hope my water powers aren't as fickle as everything else. What if I can't control it, and I accidentally make someone go to the bathroom?!”

“Steven, it’s fine, I’m sure-” Connie said, attempting to comfort him, but Steven continued ranting.

“I’d never do something to purposefully hurt someone, but- Oh no! What if I accidentally made someone’s heart explode, or-”

Connie placed her hand on his shoulder. “Steven. It’s fine. As long as I’m around, between the two of us we’ll be genre savvy enough to prevent you from slipping into evil, alright? Trust me.”

Steven took a deep breath, calming himself down. “But what if I have an accident? I make people cry whenever I get sad, and… I- I just kinda worry sometimes, y’know? I mean, making people sad is one thing, but if this got out of control…” he trailed off.

“Oh, Steven…” Connie offered him a kind smile. “I'll always be here for you, okay? No matter
“But what if...”


“I just hope that I figure this thing out by Fall, or-” Steven was interrupted by Pearl

“Figure out what, by Autumn, my Diamond?”

Steven craned his head to see Pearl approaching them from the boardwalk. She had apparently collected herself on her brief grocery run, and she no longer looked like she was about to break down in sobs or faint. “My water powers. We just fought a water amoeba flea monster thing with Garnet!”

Pearl immediately dropped the bags, shortly thereafter picking them back up amidst rapidly mumbled apologies. “I- What an adventure I must have missed standing in line,” she said, in a tone much more strained than normal. She almost sounded like the white Pearl.

“I don’t think it’ll be a normal thing. At least hopefully not. But look on the bright side! If all of these monsters keep showing up, you’ll get to show off your cool sword moves!” Pearl shivered, images of a Steven mauled by corrupted abominations flashing through her mind.

“Perhaps I’ll have to. There is no shortage of cor- monstrosities on this planet.” How ironic. The means that Homeworld had used to secure its victory were now threatening to kill her S- her Diamond. It was for the greater good. The chaos surely would’ve spread throughout the galaxies if the Rebellion continued for much longer. It was for the greater good. Yes, the greater good.

And still, Pearl couldn’t stop thinking about how truly fragile Steven was.
A thundering roar shook the ground as the beast charged Rose Quartz, fangs bared. Scars were visible through its thick orange fur, and cruel, jagged horns erupted from where its eyes should’ve been. It towered over all the Gems present, but despite its size it moved like tangerine lightning towards the quartz.

In a blur of motion, Garnet intercepted the monstrosity just before it reached Rose, grabbing it by the horns. The fusion’s immense strength barely kept the monster at bay, her feet grinding grooves into the snow as the abomination steadily pushed her back.

“Now’s your chance!” Garnet yelled through grit teeth.

The white Pearl leapt up into the air, leaving behind a small cloud of snow as she twirled above the trees. Summoning her spear with a flourish, a dozen calculations flashed through her mind as she adjusted her weapon to hit the abomination with the optimal balance of force and accuracy. Which is to say, the maximum possible on both accounts.

What she didn’t account for was this beast showing any hint of intelligence. It swung to the left, before jerking towards the right with all of its power. The abomination caught Garnet off guard, sending her sailing through the air and slamming into Amethyst and the blue Pearl. As the three collected themselves, Rose Quartz expertly floated away from another massive beast’s wild swipes. Pearl and Garnet scrambled to their feet, the fusion yanking Amethyst out of the way just before a wild tail lash would’ve smashed her gem into smithereens.

“Let’s take down one at a time!” Rose Quartz ordered, summoning another flowery shield to parry a powerful blow that nearly sent her hurtling into the trees.

The Gems regrouped. Pearl, Garnet, Amethyst, and Rose kept the monster off its balance while the white Pearl charged her spear with devastating magical energy. There was one thing that they forgot, though: In the excitement, Steven’s presence had slipped their minds.

Steven jogged towards the group, huffing and puffing, but in a flash of orange he was cut off by the other monster. Steven’s heart raced and fear pricked at his mind as he backed up slowly. “Easy there… doggy…” he said soothingly, making vaguely placating gestures. His eyes scanned the clearing for something, anything to get him out of his situation as he moved backwards. After a few agonizing moments, Steven spotted something. Well, tripped over something.

It was a piece of driftwood with two large metal nails on either side. As the monster became increasingly agitated, he picked it up out of desperation, channeling his inner anime hero. Recalling a certain move, Steven inhaled deeply and steeled himself. “BOOMERANG BLADE!” he shouted, launching the board towards the beast in a whirl. He didn't expect much from blow other than a
momentary distraction, so he began stumbling away from the monster as soon as the improvised weapon left his hands. To his surprise, the board flew with incredibly force, shrieking through the crisp air.

The large stake embedded itself into the monster’s projection with a sickening crunch. All eyes were on it as it howled and cried out in pain before it exploded into a cloud of magical mist. Its gem dropped to the earth.

Everybody stood stock still for a moment, even the monster. Breaking out of his shock at his victory, Steven smiled triumphantly, running toward the gem lying in the sand. “I did it!” Steven bubbled it as a reflex, then patted himself on the back as he sent it away.

Snapping out of her stupor, Garnet leapt forward and tackled the other one, pinning it in place. “What the...?” Rose mumbled, still more than a little dazed. “But… even I couldn’t… no sword...” She drove her magnificent pink blade into the heart of the beast, dissipating it. Shaking, the white Pearl bubbled it and teleported it back to the temple.

The Gems rushed Steven, crowding the boy. Pearl approached him with a smile. “Excellent work, my Diamond.”

“High five, Ste-man!” Amethyst whooped, slapping skin with a grinning Steven.

“Beginner’s luck,” Other Pearl grumped, shrugging. “Your form was sloppy, and that technique wouldn't have worked without your Gem strength.”

Rose and Amethyst frowned. “Come on, P, that was pretty awesome! He took a whole monster out on his own!” Amethyst protested.

“It was a fluke,” Other Pearl said dryly.

“Well, you know what?” Steven said. “A fluke is one of the most common fish in the sea. So, if you go fishing for a fluke, chances are you just might catch one.”

The white Pearl stared at him incredulously. “That metaphor… actually makes certain kinds of bizarre sense.” She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Whatever. It’s not my problem if a monster smashes you into a meat pancake and diamond shards.”

Rose gasped. “Pearl!”

She rolled her eyes. “What, are you going to order me to-”

“Yes, I am. You do have a point. He… could use some training,” Rose conceded.

The white Pearl’s eyes widened. “Buh-wha-why-gah-” she spluttered.

Steven glanced at his Pearl. “Pearl can just teach me, though.”

“Steven…” Rose searched for the right words. “Our Pearl,” Pearl bristled at her words, “has been a master of blades of all types for the past several thousand years, constantly seeking to improve her skills and expand her armory. Your Pearl has been doing this for…”

“About a decade,” she whispered.

“She’s got a lot to learn. And a lot to unlearn,” Other Pearl grumbled. “So. Rose’s offer stands. I suppose.”
Rose Quartz frowned. “At least try to be polite, Pearl. You should still remember your manners.”

Pearl blushed blue and pursed her lips, choking back tears. She looked everywhere for a distraction, and caught Steven staring at her with sparkling eyes. “Now?”

Steven nodded. “I suppose,” she grumbled. Pearl could use the distraction, anyways.

OxOxO

“Woooooow…” Steven whispered, eyes wide as the Warp Stream deposited them on a floating stair, crumbling to pieces with its strange magic somehow keeping it afloat just above the clouds. He cautiously took a step forward, testing his weight on a stone fragment. It was as if it was anchored to the ground.

“Watch your step, my Diamond,” Pearl said as Steven first walked slowly, then began to run with great abandon up the stair. She nearly dissipated from fright when she saw her Diamond trip over a near-invisible crack, then breathed a sigh of relief as he quickly recovered and climbed up onto the platform.

Soon enough, the other Gems caught up with Steven, who was exploring every nook and cranny of the small Arena. The place still had a certain beauty to it despite its decrepit state. Just looking at the exquisite murals carved into the dilapidated pillars reminded Pearl of all of the wondrous duels and tournaments that her Diamond had attended with her before… before… before all this.

One by one, all the Gems and Steven had made their way to the worn stone bleachers while the white Pearl paced across the Arena, her hands clasped behind her back. Barely managing to choke her displeasure down, Pearl sighed and turned towards them, resigned to her fate.

“Alright, in order to give a proper demonstration I’m going to need a sparring partner.” she began. Steven went to raise his hand, but Pearl intercepted it and gently pushed it down. “Pearl?”

The blue Pearl stood, summoning her sword with a flourish. Other Pearl pulled a metal sabre from her gem, then settled into a easy stance, smirking at Pearl. Pearl immediately charged at her white counterpart with astounding speed, leaving behind a small cloud of dust. The white Pearl’s eyes widened at the assault and barely managed to raise her sword in time. Thunder resounded throughout the arena when the two blades met, and a shockwave that managed to knock Steven off his seat exploded from the point of conflict.

Gritting her teeth as sparks flew from metal grinding on hard light, the white Pearl suddenly dropped to the floor and unleashed a sweeping kick that forced her opponent backwards, giving her just enough space to spring to her feet and begin her own offensive. Her sabre danced in an intricate pattern, invisible save for a barely visible silver blur in the air. The blue Pearl recovered quickly, her summoned rapier batting aside blow after blow as the two sped across the arena, uprooting millennia-old dust and dirt in their wake.

Scowling, the white Pearl channeled all of her strength into a single devastating blow. Her mirror held her blade with both hands to block and slid backwards, her expression impassive as she let the momentum from the other Pearl’s strike push her away. She flipped into the air, briefly obscuring the sun from her opponent for a moment before speeding downwards with her blade outstretched.

In the split-second that the blue Pearl was hanging in the air, her opponent smirked. Almost dismissively, she kicked at her counterpart’s hand, loosening the blue Pearl’s grip before she knocked the rapier away from her opponent, sending it clattering against the Arena floor before it dissipated into white light. To her credit, the blue Pearl still gracefully landed on her feet, and as per
custom, knelt before the victor.

“Aww…” Steven groaned. “I was rooting for you, Pearl!”

“Ugh. I wish someone would knock P off her high horse…” Amethyst muttered as the white Pearl pointed her sword at Pearl’s neck.

“You were an excellent opponent, but you still have much to learn.” the senior swordfighter said, her voice surprisingly warm. The duel was actually quite thrilling to her. Spars with holograms could get quite dull after thousands of years of battling the same program. It was honestly surprising how adept the other Pearl was at swordplay, and in the excitement of the battle she had forgotten her perpetual irritation with the Blue Diamond’s Pearl. Her annoyance shortly returned.

Other Pearl lowered her sword, turning to the audience. “Alright then. For now, we should start with the basics.” Steven jumped to his feet and ran to the Pearls. “I want you to stand back and watch me carefully,” the white Pearl instructed as her counterpart got up and summoned her rapier once more.

Steven stepped back a few feet, diamonds still shining in his eyes. “What form?” Pearl asked, her rapier loosely held in her hand.

“Atero form one. You explain to him.” Other Pearl said, dropping into the appropriate stance.

Pearl and Other Pearl began to calmly attack one another, blades moving at a leisurely pace especially compared to their previous battle. Parry, parry, thrust. Thrust, thrust, parry. Parry, parry, thrust, in an endless cycle.

“Oh, uhm… Do you see what I’m doing with my feet, my Diamond?” Pearl asked him, a hint of shame in her voice. “Notice where I keep my center of gravity.”

Steven’s interest rapidly faded. His shoulders sagging, Steven asked “Aw, can you show me something cool? Like how to do a Boomerang Blade! I will admit, my attempt was a little lackluster. I couldn’t get the proper spin on it.”

Pearl looked over her shoulder at Steven. “My Diamond, you know that's not a real sword technique.”

Steven began bobbing up and down, fists pumping as he chanted, “Boomerang Blade! Boomerang Blade! Boomerang Blade!”

Pearl sighed, and began lecturing him. “These are real sword techniques, my Diamond. Not those silly things from your movies. It’s about waiting carefully for the perfect moment to-”

She cried out in agony as her white counterpart skewered her straight through the torso. “Strike…” Other Pearl finished smugly, locking gazes with Steven.

“Pearl…” Rose grumbled, standing up and brushing imaginary dust off her dress.

Steven couldn’t believe his eyes. Pearl’s lip quivered. All of a sudden, she burst into smoke just like the monsters from earlier that day. Her gemstone hit the floor with a clink. Steven dove to the ground, cradling the only remnant of his guardian. “NOOOOOOOOOO!” he screamed, tears flowing down his face.

“Oh, don’t be dramatic. That was simply a demonstration of the amount of mercy and tolerance for shenanigans you’ll find on the battlefield.” Other Pearl snickered. “She’ll-”
“You- You killed her!” Steven yelled, burning rage simmering in his eyes even as he cried.

Tears streamed from the white Pearl’s eyes too. “What?”

“You killed my mom!” he angrily shouted, his eyes wide and frantic. “Just because you didn't like her?! Pearl was twice the pearl you will ever be!”

“What?” Other Pearl repeated, thoroughly confused. None of this made sense. Homeworld Gems barely batted an eye when their Pearls were shattered, let alone simply dispersed. “No, you- I-” Anxiety crept upon her in suffocating waves. “I- I only meant to-”

Steven sobbed, shouting, “Get away from me, or I'll-”

He ceased almost immediately when Rose Quartz clasped a hand on his shoulder. “Steven. Pearl will be fine.”

The boy gazed at the round stone in his hands. “W-what?” he said, numb. “She will?”

“Have you never seen a gem’s physical form destroyed before?” Rose asked him, uncaring of the tears dripping from her eyes. He shook his head.

“Sometimes, if our bodies are badly damaged, we release our physical forms and retreat to our gems to regenerate.” Garnet calmly explained, although her demeanor was betrayed by glowing blue tears leaking out from under her glasses.

Steven’s sobs ceased, and everybody else soon stopped crying as well. He stood up, cradling the gem gingerly. “So she's gonna be okay?” he asked, twiddling his fingers.

“These sort of things happen. Usually on accident…” Rose said, glaring daggers at Pearl. “And usually to Amethyst.”

The violet gem walked over, hands behind her head. “Always to me. I’m pretty scrappy.”

“I believe it,” the boy said with a weak chuckle.

Other Pearl stared at her sword detachedly. “I'm... I'm sorry,” she apologized. “I... didn't realize how much you cared for one another.”

Steven smiled at her apology. “Thanks, Pearl. Can we... be friends finally?”

Other Pearl’s eyes softened, and her lips pursed. “Er- maybe...? At the least, I won't be as rude. As I have been. I didn't think... In all my years... I'm... sorry.”

The boy stared at the gem in his hands. “So... how long will it take for her to regenerate? Five minutes? Ten minutes?”

“Most likely.” Rose answered. “Homeworld gems don't usually change their forms too much between regenerations.”

OxOxO

It had been a miserable two weeks, and there was still no sign of Pearl coming back. Her gem was in a pot delicately layered with blankets on the kitchen counter. Steven sat on a stool, watching it intently. As self reliant as he was, he missed her. Every day he woke up excited for her return, only to discover nothing.
“Pearl will be fine,” Connie assured him, gently squeezing his shoulder. “The Crystal Gems said she’d come back.”

He turned to her, sighing deeply. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well, you know what we can do while we’re waiting?” she asked slyly.

Steven gasped, jumping off the stool. “Dogcopter 3 comes out in the theaters today!”

Connie grinned, pulling two tickets out of her pocket. “I mean, come on. The final showdown with Doctor Destiny oughta cheer you up!”

“Heh, yeah. I wonder if Mr. Copter’s gonna use that secret technique he’s been threatening the Doctor with the entire main trilogy?” Steven said as the two ambled out of the Palanquin.

“I mean, why wouldn’t he? It’s supposed to be the finale of the series unless they reboot or restart or spin-” Connie’s pupils contracted as she parted the curtain to the outside. “Steven…” she whispered, tugging on his sleeve.

“WhaAAAAA?” Steven screeched, staggering backwards. Not two feet away from him was a massive lion. A massive pink lion. “I- gah- buh-”

A soft giggle drifted down from the beast’s back. Eyes wide as saucers, the children slowly tilted their heads upwards to find Rose Quartz covering her mouth as she failed to hold back her laughter.

“H-hello, Miss,” Connie stuttered, somewhat dazed from her perceived brush with death.

“Oh, hello there! You must be Connie! Steven talks about you all the time,” Rose said, smiling gently.

Connie and Steven blushed in perfect sync. “H-he does?” Connie asked, voice still tremulous.

“Why, yes, of course. He has nothing but nice things to say about you, like-”

“WHAT’S THE NAME OF YOUR LION?” Steven shouted, cutting Rose off at the pass before she talked herself into some rather embarrassing territory.

Rose Quartz chuckled. “His name is Leo. Sorry for just showing up like this, by the way. Garnet said you two would need a ride, and considering how well you did last mission, I figured I owed you a fun day out on the town.”

Steven blushed once more. “T-t-thanks,” he stammered out. “Can Leo take us to the movie theater?”

Rose laughed again, holding a hand out to the children. “Climb on.”

Steven clambered up first, helping Connie up after him. “Alright, this may be a little disorienting, but trust me when I say the rainbows are perfectly normal,” Rose said, digging her knees into Leo’s sides.

“Wait, whAAAAAA!” the children screamed as Leo ran off the cliff. Leo began to plummet towards the jagged rocks on the shore, but just before Connie could finish mentally bemoaning her ignominious fate, the beast let out a mighty roar. At this point the children simply squeezed their eyes shut and hoped that Rose hadn’t suddenly gone insane and decided to kill them all on a whim.

With a rush of howling wind and a flash of rainbow light, the two could feel Lion skid to a stop. Cautiously, they opened their eyes to find an echoing natural cave. A softly glowing marble platform
dominated most of the cavern and illuminated the room. Water dripped from the forest of stalactites hanging overhead and pooled over the floor.

Other Pearl was in the cave as well, inspecting her blade atop the marble dais. She dropped the sword with a clang. “Rose, you brought them here?!”

Rose climbed down from the lion, while Connie and Steven slid off of the animal’s furry back, nearly faceplanting into the water. “Yes, I did. Welcome to my armory,” Rose said to the children, walking up the small set of stairs leading to the dais. Awestruck, they followed her, glancing at the pattern carved into the center of the platform that was identical to the design on Rose’s shield.

When Rose’s feet brushed the indentation that marked the center of the dais, it became awash in a pink light that sped towards where the three spiraling lines converged, and a pedestal in the shape of Rose’s left hand sprouted from the stone. Rose touched her palm to it, and in an instant, the entire dais lit up.

Pearl pursed her lips. “Why are you showing them this? Even Garnet and Amethyst don't know!”

“I know, right? This is even better than the Dogcave!” Connie replied.

Rose smiled gently. “I’m sorry about Pearl’s actions. No matter her personal feelings about your… guardian, that was completely uncalled for. As an apology, I have a present for you.” With a snap of her fingers, a column of pink light rose from the edge of the dais, which quickly vanished to reveal a collection of swords from a variety of eras and cultures suspended in midair.

“That’s a katana, and a wakizashi, and an English longsword, and a siax, and a khopesh, and a zweihander, and a flamberge, and a scimitar, and a gladius, and a sabre, and a rapier, and a falchion, and a… and a… I don’t even know what that is!” Connie muttered under her breath, utterly enthralled.

Pearl pursed her lips. “Rose, the-”

“Nonsense.” Rose interrupted. “It’s my consolation gift. Everything here hasn't been used since the war, anyway. And these won’t be ever used that way again. Now, let’s get started! Steven, have you ever heard of a gladius? I feel like it would be just your style…”

OxOxO

Steven jogged through Beach City, holding Pearl’s gemstone an arms length away while the sheath of the kho-thingy that Rose gave him thudded against his thigh, just in case she came back. The boy was starting to grow impatient.

He didn’t even know what would happen! Would she hatch from the gemstone like an egg? Perhaps it would grow a mouth and vomit Pearl, like a clam? Maybe he would have to stick her in a clam, he just didn't know!

Steven felt eyes on his back. The Crystal Gem Pearl was perched on a roof, staring down at him intently.

“I know you feel bad, but, um, following me all the time is creepy! I mean, the Funland bathroom is a private place!” Steven exclaimed, unconsciously stepping backwards.

She leapt down, blushing as blue as Pearl’s hair. “I'm sorry, Steven. I just feel guilty, what if
something happens to you while Pearl isn't around to watch you?"

He narrowed his eyes. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have stabbed her!”

She shrank down slightly under his gaze. “Well, er-” she mumbled.

Steven sighed, looking down. “I'm sorry I yelled. It's just- I'm glad you're being nice now, but you had to really hurt someone to get there.”

Tears began to stream down her face as she chuckled warily. “I'm sorry. Mistreating you two… I thought…” she remembered Rose’s warning to not tell him about anything related to Homeworld, “Well… I don’t know. You two… care for each other.”

“Yeah.” Steven said. “I just can’t wrap my head around why you didn't like me.”

“The Crystal Gems weren’t exactly on the best terms with your mother.” the white Pearl explained. “Lots of- er- bad memories. I’m sorry now. I… shouldn’t have treated you poorly for something beyond your control.”

“That's okay.” he said. She had already made it up to him in his book. Pearl had become a friend. “You can make it up to me by teaching me swords with Pearl!”

“Uhm, well, swordfighting?” she nervously queried. “I believe that would-”

Other Pearl stopped as blue light glowed from within the boy’s fist. He gasped loudly, setting the gemstone on the concrete. “Pearl’s back!”

Sure enough, the Pearl lifted into the air. A familiar body grew from the Gem in a flash of light. Pearl floated down to her feet gracefully.

Except she was… different. Gone was the simple cyan leotard and the transparent skirt. Pearl had adopted an ocean blue blouse that her normal skirt fluttered over. Soft, lacy sleeves covered her arms up to her shoulder, and she wore fingerless gloves over her hands.

“Wow, you look so pretty!” Steven said, eyes shimmering.

She ignored Steven, stumbling left, then right. In a flash, she summoned her rapier and lunged forward, piercing the white Pearl straight through the chest with her blade.

Steven gasped. “Pearl, no!”

Pearl’s eyes widened beneath her bangs as she finally registered her surroundings. “Oh dear.”

“Well played,” the other Pearl spluttered, staring down at the sword rammed right where her heart would be if she was human.

Pearl smiled weakly. “Oh, um. Apologies. Though, ah, I suppose now we are even…” she whispered.

Other Pearl released her form into a puff of smoke, her gemstone hitting the ground.

Chapter End Notes
Wooooow, what a chapter, right?

Major props to TheDoomKitten for her vast improvements to the fight scenes, they amaze me! She's proud of them, for good reason! Seriously, they are awesome! Give her some props!

We've got a discord now for our blog at kmNpaaH.
“Whaaaaaaat!? Why not?”

Connie slid down the wall, phone clutched to her ear. “Steven, I told you, I can't hang out today. I have tennis practice. And then Mom wants to go out for a family dinner.” Her voice lightened. “But… she said I could hang out all day tomorrow, and I can come over all the time now that it's summer vacation!”

Steven parroted her, utterly bamboozled. “Summer… vacation?”

“You know, when school gets out for summer?” she explained, perplexed.

The boy pursed his lips. “Uh, I've never been to this- how do you say- ‘school.’ How does it work?”

“It's a place where you go to learn. It's full of desks, chalkboards…” she said. “You know, stuff to help you learn about the world. Anyways, I'm sorry to cut this short, but I've got to go. See you later!”

“See you!” Steven replied, smiling goofily.

“Perhaps this learning method that your friend suggested has some merit, my Diamond,” Pearl whispered, seemingly appearing out of thin air. Of course, Pearl had heard of such institutions, but did not believe them necessary for Steven’s education until she came into contact with Connie and found her own skill in middle-range algebra sorely lacking compared to the child’s.

Steven nearly jumped three feet straight up. “Gee, Pearl! Don’t scare me like that!”

“Apologies, my Diamond. Regarding the subject of this ‘school,’ I will admit, my skills in mathematics can be somewhat lacking, and a more structured, outsourced regimen for your education may compensate my deficiencies in basic algebra. Although a public institution is not an option due to your unique needs, I believe borrowing techniques from such a place could be beneficial. This may also be a perfect time to show you some of Gem culture and history, if we’re adjusting your schooling. Amethyst may have some of the necessary materials in her…” Pearl shivered. “...heap.”
Steven’s eyes sparkled. “Wowie! Really? I can finally learn about Mom?”

Pearl’s heart sank. “...perhaps, my Diamond.”

OxOxO

Sure enough, the purple quartz possessed most of the items that Pearl had on her checklist. They had found them easily (although retrieving them from the trash piles was another matter entirely), and now Steven sat in the Palanquin in a rather outdated desk, somewhat regretting his earlier choice to so eagerly agree to Pearl’s suggestion. Before him were the two Pearls sitting together at a rather uncomfortable distance from each other behind a wooden teacher’s desk, upon which sat several textbooks from various eras (including some tenth century monkish scrolls written in Latin) and a stack of paper.

“Now, um, how do we begin school?” Steven asked.

Other Pearl looked distinctly uneasy. “Yes, I’m eager to try this too! Whatever ‘this’ is,” she said, her cheer obviously forced. Due to her propensity for organization, the white Pearl was enlisted to set up the “classroom,” but Steven had a sneaking suspicion that she’d rather be doing anything else.

Pearl pursed her lips as she consulted the notes that she had made based on the previous day’s research. “Steven, please take out your ‘notebook’ in preparation for the day’s ‘warmup activity,’ which will prepare you for today’s lessons.”

“Wait, you’re teaching him?” Other Pearl asked. “Is that what’s all this is for?”

Steven shrugged. “Yeah. I want to learn about Gem culture and Mom and stuff! And math too, I guess.”

Other Pearl’s eyes glowed with delight from the opportunity to show off. Wriggling her way out of the desk and ignoring Pearl’s glares, she took up a wide stance, closing her eyes in concentration. “TWOOOAH! HAAAAAAAAH!” she shouted, performing an intricate dance. It was rather silly-looking, but the ritual did bear fruit in the form of an ornate mirror that she pulled out of her gem. The spectacle was largely lost on Steven, as his Pearl had demonstrated a similar ability before. Although her ritual was less flashy. And far less ridiculous.

Pearl clapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp at the sight of the object in her counterpart’s hands. Of course the other Pearl had the item that could shatter the fragile shell that she had built for Steven with a few careless words. Of course.

“We found this Gem-powered mirror at the Galaxy Warp. It can capture and display any event it’s witnessed in all of Gem history,” the white Pearl bragged, oblivious of the other’s panic.

Steven gasped and stared at the mirror in awe. “Can it really? Has… it seen my mom?”

Other Pearl offered it to Steven, smiling genuinely. “It very well may have. It’ll offer you everything you’ve ever wanted to know about your fellow Gems and our culture.” Steven accepted it reverently.

“Perhaps Steven is not ready for some of the topics that may be recorded in there. There are some things that I’d—” Pearl objected.

“Oh, hush, I’ll make sure he doesn’t see anything inappropriate,” other Pearl interrupted, rolling her eyes. “I’m fairly certain… oyster clubs wouldn’t be relevant to what this mirror recorded, anyways. The style suggests that it was created during the war.”
Steven stared at his reflection in the mirror, and started giggling heartily. “I must be incredibly important to Gem culture.”

“It hasn't even been activated,” other Pearl said, slightly peeved. Snatching it away from Steven, she cleared her throat. “Show us the Galaxy Warp.” When nothing happened, she huffed, frustrated. “I know you've seen it. Show us!”

“Here, let me try.” Begrudgingly, the white Pearl handed it back to him. “Show me Blue Diamond,” he requested. The mirror remained inactive. “I guess it works.” He chuckled. “I am Blue Diamond after all.”

Other Pearl pursed her lips. “Well, Pearl, it looks like it's a moot point anyways. I think it's finally broken.”

A wave of relief flooded Pearl. “Albeit currently in disrepair, the mirror could aid some parts of my curriculum greatly. Pearl, that will be all. Why don’t you take your leave while I examine the mirror and find a way to repair it?” she suggested, plans of how to innocuously sabotage the tool before it could impart damaging information to her Diamond already forming in her mind as the white Pearl silently fumed. “My Diamond, go outside and play while I work on repairing the device.”

Steven smiled mischievously. “I guess you could say school is out for summer?”

“Yes, I did.” she said, cocking her head in confusion. Perhaps Steven was attempting to repay the favor and teach her the proper use of idioms? She was already conducting her own research on the matter, but the effort was still appreciated.

Other Pearl, seething, was about to unleash a tirade of epic proportions upon her counterpart for the casual dismissal before remembering Steven was there to witness it. Sighing, she left the Palanquin without a word.

Steven slid out of his chair to give Pearl back the mirror, but he was interrupted by his own voice. “-Blue Diamond,” the mirror said, mimicking the boy.

“Woah, woah, woah, what?!” Steven gasped. “You can talk?!”

“Wh-what?” Pearl whispered, her pupils contracting from fear. It shouldn’t be possible. It wasn’t possible. Mirrors could only record and display scenes wholesale, much less show something without external prompting.

“-can-” the mirror said. “-gems- out-”

Swiftly figuring out the limitations of the entity, Steven asked, “I'm going to ask you yes or no questions, okay?”

“-okay?-

“Steven-” Pearl was growing desperate, rising out of her chair to intercept him if the mirror strayed too close to information that Blue Diamond ordered her to keep hidden.

“Are you a Gem like us?” he said, voice brimming with concern.

“-yes-”

“Do you want to be free?”
“-yes-”

“Will you hurt us?”

“-no-”

“Steven, I—” Pearl said, now at Steven’s side and holding a hand out as if to take the mirror. He glanced towards her, iron in his eyes. If she was a human, Pearl’s heart would be racing as she struggled to decide whether to obey the orders of her former master and the will of her current one. Ultimately, she couldn’t deny him. “Be careful with her…”

“Do you promise?” Steven asked, staring intently at the mirror.

“-yes-”

“Alright then. Do I just have to remove your gem?” he asked, flipping the mirror over. That was when he realized what rough shape the Gem was in. Hissing through his teeth, he said, “Oh geeeeeeeeeze. I’ve never seen a broken gem before. Does this hurt?”

“-yes-yes-”

“Don’t worry. I’m getting you out of there!” Steven grasped the gem and began to pull, but his human strength wasn’t nearly enough. His eyes flashed blue, and with a grunt he popped the Gem out of her prison.

The mirror shattered, polished glass flying everywhere. Steven yelped, shielding his eyes. The gemstone flew from his hand and illuminated the room in a gentle blue, the light slowly solidifying. Reformed, the Gem dropped to the floor, leaning on Pearl for support. Her hair was a navy blue, and her skin a neon tint of the same color. She wore a two piece sundress, and her gemstone rested on her back.

Lapis Lazuli groaned, looking up at Steven with her glassy, mirror-like eyes. “I… I’m free,” she choked out, as if she were about to vomit.

Steven’s stepped forward as if to comfort Lapis, but stopped at the last second, uncertain. “Yeah. You are.”

Lapis swayed from side to side, bewildered. “I- I don’t… You freed me! You… talked to me.”

“Well, yeah.” Steven shrugged. “You were a cool mirror, but you’re also a person. Of course I wasn’t going to leave you in there!”

“Those Crystal Gems knew I was in there, and they…” she said, stumbling backwards. Roused from her stunned state, Pearl easily caught her. An image of a grey fist hurtling towards her briefly appeared on the glassy surface of Lapis’ eyes, almost too quick to notice. Her mind whirled with recovered memories and half-formed thoughts that were now free of the tight constraints of her prison, and they all converged upon one emotion: pure rage.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he helped Pearl drag Lapis to the couch.

“My gem’s cracked. Other than that, I’m fine,” she said dryly as she collapsed onto the springy surface of the couch. Then she looked around, noticing for the first time the familiar walls of Blue Diamond’s palanquin and the massive, stately throne smothered in pillows. “Wait. What are we doing here? I thought… this was destroyed during… wait, was it already… this is Hers, but… who are you?” Lapis sank into the soft pillows, clutching her forehead as spears of ice jabbed at her mind.
Steven pulled the collar of his shirt down, revealing his gemstone to her. “I'm Steven. I'm... not exactly Blue Diamond. She was my mother. I guess I'm a Blue Diamond like how Wesley was a Dread Pirate Roberts.”

Lapis closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “W-what? You're Her... child?” she said, hazy memories of visits to Pink Diamond’s zoo playing on her eyes like a TV screen as she struggled to recall some of the more disgusting details of organic reproduction. “How is that possible?! Where is She?”

“Dead,” Pearl whispered, her voice heavy with carefully concealed emotion. “Our Diamond gave up Her physical form to give birth.”

Lapis sank into the couch further, shocked. “She killed herself?” she whispered, grief unlike any other pulsing in her gem. Thousands of memories of Blue Diamond’s regality and power flashed across her eyes.

“You are out of line, Lazuli,” Pearl barked, steel in her voice. Damn the lazuli’s aristocratic standing, damn her own rank as property, no one disrespected her Diamond, even as the truth of the lazuli’s words echoed within her gem. “It was a choice made with a clear mind and heart, as the humans say. He has Her authority, and will one day take Her rightful place among the Diamonds.”

Lapis’ eyes widened at the blatant show of disrespect. The pearls of the Diamonds always held a complicated position within the court, but with the exception of Yellow Diamond’s, they all still remembered their place. Stars, Blue Diamond’s Pearl was always the most demure of all of them. Still, they carried the Diamonds’ authority with them. She saluted dutifully, her hands shaking. “Forgive me, my Diamond.”

“It’s fine,” Steven said gently. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Regardless, Lapis, we must leave to heal your gem before its cracks worsen,” Pearl said.

“I-isn’t it dangerous for her to move? I mean, what if she cracks even more?” Steven stuttered.

Pearl swiftly silenced his objections. “We have no other choice, my Diamond. We have the means to heal her gem if the damage was less severe, but these cracks are beyond any technology’s ability to repair, never mind what we currently have at our disposal. But Rose Quartz has the ability to bring Gems like her back from the brink. I believe she’ll cooperate.” Steven got up to follow, but Pearl shook her head and fabricated a plausible excuse. “Stay here, my Diamond. The situation may be... tense since the lazuli is an entirely new factor, and I don’t want you to become injured.”

“W-Rose Quartz?!” Lapis exclaimed. “What the-”

Pearl grabbed Lapis by the hand and pulled her up, walking out of the Palanquin in a stately manner with a stunned Lapis in tow. Once they reached the edge of the cliff, Pearl jumped off and landed on the sand below, catching Lapis and gently setting her down.

“I order you to explain.” Lapis said, shaken from her stupor, but her mind was still overwhelmed. “P-please. What’s happening here? I don’t remember... shouldn’t this ocean have been terraformed by now if I was in that mirror? They had to have sent a replacement Lazuli if I... if I was...”

Pearl sighed. “I excluded Steven from this errand for a reason, Lazuli. We have matters to discuss that our Diamond is not ready to hear yet, and I am afraid that until you understand the full extent of the current situation, your loose tongue may earn you another crack,” she said, the threat clear. “You were imprisoned for five thousand years. The war is long over. The Rebellion won, and four Crystal
Gems remain,” she said bluntly. Lapis staggered back, stunned by the latest in a line of world-shattering revelations.

Lapis looked down at a crab ambling along the beach, proof that organic life was still thriving on Earth despite all odds, and clenched her fists. “Why are you on Earth if those criminals are still at large? And… and how did they even win? There is… there was… no way, they…”

“We lost the war two hundred and sixty-seven years before it ended. You were close to my Diamond… You know how devastated she was when… she shattered.” Scenes of blood and fire and grief played across the mirrors that were Lapis’ eyes, but the Gem herself remained stoic. “My Diamond retreated into grief and White Diamond likewise grew distant, leaving only Yellow Diamond to command the war effort. After no less than two dozen failed assassination attempts, Yellow Diamond ordered the planet forgotten and left after she unleashed a terrible weapon, reducing the vast majority of the Gems left behind to mindless beasts. After the war, my Diamond routinely came to this planet to mourn. She… gave up Her life for Steven’s after She found a human who could rouse Her from Her sadness, if only for a few moments. But… still, it was not enough. At least She didn’t…” Pearl left the end of that sentence unsaid.

“So she killed Herself.”

Pearl’s eyes flashed dangerously, menace dripping from her words. “If you dare say that around Steven, or breathe a word of anything about the war or Homeworld without my explicit permission, I will cut your gem into pieces. You must understand one other thing as well: Her last orders were to let Steven know the joys of humanity before thrusting the truth of rulership upon him, and I will obey Her wishes to my last fracture - and yours, if need be. Are we clear?”

“Y-yes.” There was a brief pause. “You… you really care about him… I suppose that explains…”

Pearl raised an eyebrow. “Explains what?”

“You're different from what I remember.”

Pearl sighed and ducked her head slightly, clasping her hands as the cold fire in her voice faded. “Earth changes everyone, myself included, but… My Diamond neglected Her duties for quite some time even before she made a habit of visiting this planet. So did I, due to the slack She allowed me. I've been trying to readjust for Steven. To become a good servant for him. Because…”

“He's our Diamond,” Lapis finished. “I know that. But, Pearl, this is… I still can’t… none of this makes… it’s all so confusing, and… overwhelming.” A flurry of images, some thousands of years old, some having just occurred, glimmered in Lapis’ eyes. Her Diamond was a human, and what she understood as the larval form of their species at that. The Crystal Gems won, and perhaps more bizarre, her Diamond had made some sort of truce with them. Blue fell in love with a human. She didn’t know which was more insane, the fact that she was in love in the first place or that the target of her affections was human. It was as if logic had decided to take a rest cycle for a couple thousand years.

“That’s understandable,” Pearl replied. “Once you are healed, I would not blame you if you wished to return to Homeworld. Earth… is not for everyone, despite what our Diamond believes.”

Lapis looked up at the clear blue sky, thoughtful. “My Diamond. She- I mean he- is here. You said it’s been five thousand years? Homeworld… it would be completely different. I would have no place there. And anyways,” she said with a melancholy smile, memories of thousands of pleasant years at court dancing across her eyes, “the Court has always been my true home wherever in the galaxies it roamed.”
Indeed. I am… appreciative of your decision, Lapis,” Pearl said. “Our Diamond deserves more than a one-Gem Court.”

“Yeah. Let’s… let’s just get this done. I can’t exactly serve our Diamond to my fullest while I’m like… this,” Lapis said, vaguely gesturing at her reflective eyes.

Pearl nodded, and began guiding Lapis down the beach towards the Temple. Lapis snuck glances out of the corner of her eye at the Pearl. The other Gem’s ability to conceal her deadly nature beneath a servile facade was uncanny… and terrifying. It was almost funny. Never in her thousands of years of existence would Lapis have thought that she would one day be afraid of a pearl. “I… I apologize for my earlier words. That was beyond disrespectful of Her memory.”

“Grief is a treacherous thing,” is all Pearl said, her voice completely neutral.

With their conversation laying abandoned in the space between them, the two Gems arrived. Only one Crystal Gem was within sight: the defective amethyst. She sprung to her feet at the sight of the unfamiliar Gem. “Woah, where’d you find old mirror eyes blue dragon here, B.P.?” she joked, clearly nervous.

Lapis scowled. “Who are you?”

“Amethyst,” the short haired Gem greeted, extending her arm out. Lapis just stared at the outstretched hand distastefully, so she opted to rest her arms behind her head. “Soooo, wassup?”

“This is Lapis Lazuli. We have recently liberated her from her prison, but Lapis’ gem has been cracked beyond my means to repair it,” Pearl explained. “However, your leader may be able to aid her.”

Amethyst nodded and jogged to the door, then began to knock on the rose quartz embedded in its surface. “Hey, can ya come out here?”

Rose Quartz emerged shortly thereafter, the Temple door closing behind her in a wash of pink light. “Yes, Amethyst? What is the-” Her eyebrow quirked upwards when she saw Lapis. Curiosity piqued, Rose approached Lapis unabashedly and smiled gently. “Well hello there.”

Lapis gritted her teeth and glared at Rose. Her fists clenched as memories of terror and destruction flared to life in her empty eyes.

The leader of the perpetrators made no comment. “If your gem’s cracked, you should come with me. I can heal you,” Rose said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Lapis grumbled spitefully.

Pearl suppressed a sigh. “It will be fine. If she meant us harm, Rose Quartz would have killed my Diamond and I when she found out about us.”

Lapis looked back in the direction of the Palanquin. “Fine,” she muttered before following the quartz into her room. The door slammed shut behind them.

“What do I do?” she asked, doing her best not to gawk at the immaterial pink clouds that composed the room.

“Give me a bed,” Rose said. Suddenly, a comfortable-looking mattress with velvet sheets and a pink bedspread appeared out of thin air. “Just lie down on your front. I’ll take care of the rest.”
Lapis did as Rose requested, resting her chin on her folded arms. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make this quick.” Rose assured her, then sighed ruefully. “I’m sorry about… everything. It wasn’t our intention to harm innocent Gems. I don’t know how you got hurt, but—”

If Lapis had pupils to roll, she certainly would’ve. “You did, though. And you were too much of a coward to free me and apologize. So if you hurt me or my Diamond, I’ll destroy you and every other rebel Gem in this pitiful facsimile of a true Diamond Temple.”

“That’s… understandable. No matter what you think, I really am sorry, and I hope… I hope we can become friends in the future,” Rose said, choosing her words carefully. Lapis snorted, and Rose’s eyes shone bright as magical tears fell from them, landing on the gemstone on Lapis’ back. With a flash a light, Lapis’ cracks healed, leaving the surface of her gem perfectly smooth. Lapis got to her feet as soon as Rose finished. “Can I leave now?”

Rose gestured towards where they had entered, and the door popped into existence. Lapis marched out with her fists clenched, simmering with anger and shame.

“You healed nicely!” Amethyst noted. Lapis grunted in response before grabbing Pearl by the collar of her blouse. Without any more warning, she manifested her wings and took off, ignoring Pearl’s cries of protestation, a large part of her brimming with schadenfreude for exacting revenge on the other Gem for the excessive manhandling earlier.

Lapis arrived at the Palanquin in under a minute, nearly bowling over an anxious Steven pacing and wringing his hands at the entrance. Stumbling backwards, his squealed with delight when he saw Lapis’ healed form. “Wowie! Your eyes are super pretty, miss Lazuli!”

“It’s Lapis,” she said blankly. “As a member of your court, how may I be of service to you, my Diamond?”

Steven shrugged. “Well, I mean… no offense, but we take care of ourselves pretty well here. But… why don’t you stay here with us? You seem like a pretty cool person to hang with, and I’m sure you can help out somehow. I mean, if you don’t want to go back to Homeworld. I understand if you do, though.”

Before Lapis could stop them, tears fell from her eyes. Homeworld was a place. Blue Diamond’s Court was her home. And it felt good to come home after so, so long. Still, a certain level of decorum must be maintained in front of her Diamond. “I will remain in your court, my Diamond,” Lapis replied, voice cracking slightly.

“It’s… it’s just Steven,” Steven said, chuckling awkwardly.

Lapis smiled ever so slightly. “Yes, my Steven.”
Chapter Summary

Lapis adjusts.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Doomkitten here! We spent a lot of time figuring out how to handle this one, so I hope you enjoy it! To enhance your experience, I would suggest reading the last conversation between Steven and Lapis with His Theme (https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=p4j36PwEzb4) playing in the background. You'll know what I mean when you get there, trust me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steven’s fingers drummed on the wooden picnic table, the clifftop breeze ruffling his messy hair. He glanced to his left. His dad was sweating profusely. He glanced to his right. Pearl was sipping Raspberry Sugar Shock Shutdown from a wineglass. He looked straight forward. Lapis was holding her fork in one hand, alternating between staring at it and the pizza on her paper plate.

Pearl set her drink down and looked at the mostly empty pizza box at the center of the table distastefully. Then, with great trepidation, she picked up a slice and raised it to her mouth, biting down. Oh, the things she did for her Diamond.

Lapis, having finally figured out the purpose of the fork, asked, “Is providing your guests with weapons a human tradition? Will there be a duel later on?”
Greg paled. “Um, no. Those are, um, ways to politely eat your food.” He chuckled, sweat continuing
to bead on his forehead. “Because, um, some people… like to eat… pizza… with… forks.”

“I see.” Lapis clearly did not see. “So, do I just… put it in my mouth and move my jaw up and
down?”

“Um… there’s more to it than that,” Steven said. This was not going nearly as well as he hoped.
“Pearl, can you…”

“Yes, my Diamond.” Closing her eyes - which wasn’t very obvious behind her bangs - Pearl
summoned a completely lifelike hologram of the human digestive system from her gem. “This is a
good blueprint for-

“NO NO NO PEARL NO,” The young Diamond screeched, looking like he was about to retch as
he saw pizza-mush slowly degrade into excrement.

Tours at the human Zoo alongside her Diamond, gawking and giggling at Pink’s menagerie. She
was so regal, so elegant, so unlike him, how could he hold up her legacy when-

Pearl blinked. “Apologies, my Diamond.” The hologram winked out of existence.

Greg looked as queasy as Steven. “…thank you, Pearl,” he murmured, shoving his plate into the
trash.

Lapis picked up her slice of pizza, looking at it quizzically. After a moment of deliberation, she just
said, “My Steven? I don’t think I understand pizza.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Steven burst out laughing. Greg soon followed his son’s
example, and even Pearl allowed herself a small smile. “That doesn't answer my question,” Lapis
deadpanned.

“I- I’m sorry,” Greg apologized, wiping a tear from his eye. “It’s, well… you’re just so… alien,
y’know?”

Lapis arched an eyebrow. “But I am an alien. At least from your perspective.”

Greg sighed. “No, no, it’s just… Blue and Pearl here just seemed to know all this stuff already when
I met them. I mean, they’ve been visiting this planet for thousands of years, so I guess they picked up
some stuff, but… but I never expected that you wouldn’t know how food works!”

The blue Gem grew quiet as she poked at her pizza with her fork. “I… I see.” She paused. “Greg, do
you… do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Sure! Whaddya wanna know?”

“What was she like?”

Greg froze, then slumped and hung his head, sighing. “She… she was the most wonderful woman I
ever met. Beautiful and kind and smart and… so many things I’m not. And even when she was
happy, her eyes were so, so sad, y’know?” He smiled fondly. “But when she smiled, it… it’s like
nothing I can describe. I just don’t know why an intergalactic space queen would fall for a goof like
me.”

Staring down a battalion of rubies, then crushing them without a thought. Steven couldn’t- wouldn’t-
be able to do that, not for his life. What kind of leader would he-
Lapis dissected Greg with her eyes, trying and failing to find any redeeming qualities in the man. “I don’t either.”

OxOxO

“OH MY GOSH OH MY GOSH OH MY GOSH THIS IS GOING TO BE SO COOOOOOOL!” Steven squeaked, jumping up and down in the surf. Lapis’ Diamond had been in this state ever since he had gushed about Lapis’ “cool” water powers (Pearl had offered a tutorial on Earth idioms that Lapis had declined, but she was increasingly wishing that she had elected to stifle her pride and take some lessons from the servant), and Lapis had absentmindedly informed him that since her hydrokinesis was modeled off of Blue Diamond’s own gemetics, Steven should have them too. In the face of the unrelenting enthusiasm that followed that “revelation,” Lapis could not help but to offer him lessons. She just couldn’t say no to those eyes.

“As far as my translator substructures can make out through that high pitched squealing, you’re ready to start. Shall we begin, my Steven?” Lapis said dryly, then clapped her hand over her mouth. She’d always let her tongue run away from her, and had gotten dispersed more than once for her lack of self control. “A-a-pologies, my-

Either the snark didn’t bother Steven, or it flew straight past his sensors. “YES YES YES OHHHH YES!” he yelped, eyes sparkling.

This was her opportunity, she couldn’t mess this up, she couldn’t, she could manipulate him to favor her- no, that was so wrong, she didn’t know why but that was so, so wrong, because Steven deserved and couldn’t have and he was so unlike-

Lapis let out a small puff of air in relief. Walking further into the surf, the gem attuned herself to the subtle eddies and tides of the ocean, then raised her arms and swayed them from, side to side in the simple motions of Learning Pattern 01. Moments later, the water began heeding her call, slowly receding from Lapis and leaving behind a perfect circle of damp sand.

“This is the easiest way to start,” she began. “Focus on feeling the ocean - not just the big tides, but each tiny movement - and move your hands in the direction you want the water to go in slow, fluid motions.”

Steven snickered at Lapis’ unintentional pun, then sloshed towards her, copying the Gem’s motions. His brow furrowed and his lips pursed as he mimicked Lapis’ exact movements, his limbs stiff as he flailed. “Nothing's happening,” he complained.

“Relax,” Lapis said patiently. “You've got to go with the flow. What works for me won’t work for you, since you’re, um… shaped differently.”

Steven took a deep breath, calming himself. He stood stock still, attempting to channel his inner Diamond. For a moment, the boy so strongly resembled his mother that Lapis nearly saluted, almost breaking her form. He let the breath out and relaxed his stance, then lifted a hand, gently moving it back and forth. In a few moments, the water began to move as he commanded it.

“Very good.” Lapis smiled as she continued moving through the learning pattern, her legs making figure eights in the sand as she widened her stance, the water mirroring her and receding further away. “You should always remember that water moves with the current, not molecule by molecule. Don’t move the water, shape the tides.”

The two stood there practicing for almost ten minutes, their movements dancelike as Steven slowly pushed the water away from his flip-flops. Unconsciously, Steven began mimicking the movements
of a proud line of heroines from one of his favorite cartoons, his forms becoming more and more complex. Lapis’ eyes widened. Pattern 32. Pattern 47. Pattern 08, each flowing into one another with more grace than Lapis had thought possible without a few centuries of training. Drawing some water out of the ocean, Steven shaped it into an unstable sphere. It dripped from the bottom and occasionally lost its form, but it still followed Steven’s movements, maneuvering through the air with a simple shift or the foot or flick of his wrist. “Is this good?” Steven asked earnestly, totally unaware of his accomplishment.

Power, but what about-

“That’s… that’s great, my Steven!” Lapis immediately switched to more complex patterns, forming a whip out of the water. “Well, I don’t think I need to treat you like a newmade. Alright, this one’s a little more complex. Follow my motions exactly,” Steven immediately formed a similar armament, grinning toothily. “...how are you…”

“I learned it from a cartoon!”

OxOxO

It took Lapis a solid half-hour to realize that the primitive human machinery didn’t respond to hand gestures, and another fifteen minutes to calm the nausea pulsating through her gem once she found an active demonstration of the digestive system. She’d never be able to look at her Diamond the same way ever again.

Still, it was worth the effort to attempt to incorporate this new substructure into her form. Eating was a custom that Steven greatly enjoyed, and she didn’t want to commit another faux pas due to her lack of a natural digestive system.

Experimentally, Lapis munched on some exploded kernels into her mouth as she watched the “cartoon” that Steven had talked about so much. After her initial bout of confusion, he explained to her wasn’t an actual documentary, but rather a means of entertainment. Rolling around the corn-mush with her tongue, she couldn’t help but snicker at the startling similarities between the scarred pyrokinetic human and Yellow Diamond.

She should have been shattered for even thinking that.

Swallowing, Lapis heard Pearl whisper, “Do you know where our Diamond is, Lazuli?”

Lapis shivered slightly. Pearl’s ability to seemingly appear out of thin air still unnerved her. “Um, yeah. I think he’s outside showing the forms I taught him to his-

The servant’s voice was trembling at the edges as she interrupted Lapis. “P- Perhaps you didn’t understand me the first time we spoke at length, Lazuli...” Pearl took a deep breath. “Steven is not yet ready for his legacy. He is but a child, with no grasp of the destruction he could wreak should he lose control.”

What is she doing? This isn’t right, she’s just supposed to sit and look pretty and sing- none of this is right, none of this makes any damn sense it feels like fragmented memories and hallucinations and-

Lapis rolled her eyes, only half-paying attention to Pearl as she continued to watch the cartoon. “He’s a Diamond, not a newmade. He can handle it.”

“Steven is a child. And what would happen to a child if he accidentally killed Greg? Or one of his human friends? He’d be reduced to a shell of himself, unable and unwilling to even attempt to unlock his potential.” Pearl pressed. Pausing for a moment to calm her raging terror, Pearl summoned her
rapier and leveled it at Lapis’ gem with shaking hands. “Lazuli, listen to me. I know what grief does even to the mightiest of Gems. Steven cannot cripple himself due to your irresponsibility.”

This isn’t no no no I can’t-\n
Lapis had enough of this insolence, especially from a Pearl of all Gems. She was a Lapis Lazuli, of Blue Diamond’s High Court, and the peak of her facet with no pyrite deposits in her gem. For too long she had been treated as nothing more than a tool, and now just when she had finally regained a semblance of dignity this thing had decided that she was somehow better than just property for simply being part of the Court longer. It wasn’t some pseudo-organic piece of shale’s place to question her.

Popping another few pieces of popcorn into her mouth, Lapis said, “As you’re so fond of pointing out, Pearl, Steven isn’t Blue Diamond. The fact that he hasn’t shattered you for your independence is proof enough of that. Who are you to keep his legacy from him? His servant? His plaything? If not for his sentimentality towards his favorite toy, you’d be dust beneath my feet for the disrespect you’re showing me. Now leave, before my temper gets the-”

“L-Lapis?” A small voice drifted from the Palanquin’s entrance. “What… what are you talking about?”

A chill ran down Lapis’ spine. She gulped. “M-My Steven, I was simply… simply…”

“Lapis… please. Leave.”

“But-”

Steven’s voice was frozen. “Now.”

OxOxO

The waves Lapis’ flight stirred roared with fury as they crashed into each other, water spraying from the surface of the sea as she passed over it. In the back of her mind, Lapis’ old instructor was blathering to her about the importance of control, mixing with that upjumped piece of coral’s self-important lecture about responsibility. Well, if her position as High Courtier was somehow inferior to that of an object on the primitive hunk of rock that her Diamond had decided to hold Court on, then all the other rules might as well go out the window too. It just… it was as if everything was turned upside down. To be cast aside, to be treated as below a Pearl was beyond -

Lapis stopped short when she realized where her wings had taken her. To be treated as a thing, as a vanity piece, and then forgotten for thousands of years. The Warp Pads on the stone platform jutting out of the frothing ocean seemed to be mocking her, staring up at Lapis with cruel emerald eyes. Dazed, she alighted upon her prison, then started laughing. And laughing. And screaming as something snapped. Tears streamed from her eyes as she finally broke down, finally accepted that it would never be the same again and all of that time trapped and a plaything and at the complete mercy of her master would never go away all the pain all the madness and the questions and questions and now it would never be the same because Blue Diamond was dead dead dead and Homeworld was so far away and out of her reach and beyond her duty. This couldn’t be real, she was in the mirror again and this was all some cruel dream, another means of torture from her captors.

As Lapis’ agonized yells echoed across the empty horizon, the water rippled, then roiled. Roaring, she brought all of her wrath to bear and smashed the might of the ocean against the Galaxy Warp
again and again and again and again. Pieces of the Galaxy Warp shattered against the hundred-foot tall waves that crashed into the wretched artifact, fracturing it into pieces. In the blink of an eye, half a dozen forgotten pathways to defunct colonies vanished into the depths of the ocean.

The screams of her captors reached Lapis’ ears from the broken white vessel that tossed among the titanic waves that her storm of fury brought: that brutish agate, that stiff zircon, and finally Blue Diamond, her regality, her… her… brutality, her callousness, everything that was horrible about her came rushing back, back from behind repressed memories and false smiles and everything that kept her going while she was nothing but but lower than a Pearl.

She sunk to her knees, sobbing into her hands as the maelstrom around her reached new, ravenous heights, demolishing the Galaxy Warp piece by piece. The crackle of one of the last Warp Pads activating didn’t rouse her, nor did Steven’s cries. His voice pierced the howling might of the storm as he grasped Lapis by her shoulders, staring into her eyes as he plead with her. “Lapis, listen to me!”

“You will comply, Lazuli. Or I will shatter you like the shale you are.”

“You’re not even-” Lapis spat, hatred rising in her eyes. “I’ll never give in! I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

“Lapis, please!” Six letters. Six letters that never, ever came from her Diamond’s mouth. “We’ve got to save them!” The young Diamond yelped and pinwheeled his arms as the piece of stone he was standing on began crumbling away, its pieces sinking into the depths of the ocean. Snapping back to reality, Lapis grabbed Steven by the collar of his shirt and pulled him back to a relatively stable part of the rapidly deteriorating Galaxy Warp.

She winced. “I- I- I’m sorry, my Diamond, I-”

“There’s no time for that! C’mon, they’re drowning!” Steven pointed towards the fearful masses desperately clinging to the remnants of their ship, and began using all of his might to calm Lapis’ rage.

Her Diamond had asked, and she would provide. Eyes reflecting the insanity unfolding before her, Lapis began spinning, dancing elegantly in a way completely at odds with the chaos that surrounded them. Steven joined in the dance, grinding his teeth as he carved out a safe haven for the survivors of the catastrophe that his courtier had wrought. His arms trembled. His gem felt like it was shattering. His muscles screamed with the strain.

Steven stumbled, and the storm picked up again at a new, fervent pace. Lapis’ eyes widened. “My-”

Steven shook his head, expression grim as he hauled himself to his feet and began the dance anew

The maelstrom was a wild, hateful thing, bucking all attempts at control. Lapis sunk to one knee, then the other, her mind throbbing with agony as she poured all that she had into undoing the calamity. Steven swept by her and pulled Lapis to her feet, nearly tripping over a piece of cracked stone but regaining his balance at the last second. Minutes turned to hours turned to days in their minds as they struggled with the dual challenges of keeping the boat’s passengers safe and calming the storm. Time blurred, the dance becoming everything as it stretched into eternity.

Gems ached. Minds numbed. But the waters slowed, then stopped, leaving a perfect canvas for the setting sun to paint its beauty upon. Steven flopped to the ground, panting, everything throbbing with pain. The Homeworld warp was the last Warp Pad standing, and even it was fractured beyond all repair and scattered all across the nearby water, its components gently bobbing up and down.

“Well… that was something,” he remarked flippantly.
Lapis knelt before him. “My Diamond. Please, just get it over with.”

“What over with?” He rolled his head to face Lapis, an eyebrow arched in confusion.

“Just sha-”

“Lapis…” Steven interrupted, sighing. He sat up, drilling straight through her with the kindest eyes that Lapis had ever seen. “Don’t. Just… don’t. I’m not my mom, okay? I don’t do… that.”

The Gem reeled. “Wha- I thought you didn’t- Was Pearl just-”

Steven shook his head. “No. I… I don’t know everything. But I think I know enough.” He shifted slightly, a few inches taller, his voice an octave deeper, his hair more wild. Steven stared at the sunset. “I’m not dumb, you know. It was pretty easy to put it together once I started looking.”

Lapis opened her mouth, then closed it.

Her Diamond laughed softly. “It’s fine. I promise, I won’t hurt you, even if you say something mean.”

“It’s… it’s so inappropriate, though!” Lapis protested, sitting down next him.

Steven shrugged. “You obviously want to say it. So say it.”

Lapis, gulping, choked out, “Well, you sure fooled me.”

“Feel better?”

Lapis hugged her knees. “Not really,” she admitted. “I still don’t… why do you act like that? Like you’re some newmade ruby bumping her head against the walls of her cubby?”

Steven turned to face the ocean once again. “Imagine… imagine that you’ve just popped out of the ground, and you had, say, eighteen years - Earth years, I don’t know how time works back on Homeworld - before you had to… before you had to move an entire ocean across the galaxy.” Lapis shivered at the very thought. “What would you do with those eighteen years? And don’t tell me you’d spend them training, because there’s no way something can prepare you for that kind of challenge.”

Realization dawned in Lapis’ eyes. “I would… I would squeeze every last bit of enjoyment out of them that I could. Cherish the freedom that I had before it vanished.”

Steven nodded. “…yeah. You get it now?”

“Sorta. Not… not really, though.” Lapis paused. “Permission to speak frankly, my Steven?”

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t need permission, Lapis.”

“Why? Why are you so resigned about going back to Homeworld when you love this place so much?”

Steven kicked his feet in the completely still water, sending ripples across the surface. “I… I know Mom did some bad things. I know there’s a reason why the Crystal Gems are so afraid of her, and of me. There’s a reason why it always seems like Pearl is a single angry word away from saluting every time I walk past. And, well, I need to fix that. Undo whatever harm that Mom did. Make Homeworld a nice place again for everyone. I don’t know how, but I have to. I owe it to you, and Pearl, and the Crystal Gems… everyone who’s been hurt by her.”
Lapis gawked. “But… but that’s just the way things are! Pearls serve, lazulis terraform, quartzes fight. That’s just how it’s supposed to be! If you got rid of that, then everything would just fall apart. There’s a reason why Gems that go against it are, well, shattered. I mean, what would happen if we had Gems fusing left and right? The first time that happened, when a Ruby and a Sapphire fused, Rose Quartz and her Pearl escaped one of the only chances we had to capture her! So of course that Ruby was going to get shattered before she escaped. It just makes sense.”

“I…” Steven blanched as more pieces clicked together. He shook his head. That was a line of questioning for another day. “Not on my planet, though,” Steven said. “Not on Earth. On Earth, everyone is equal, and on Earth, you go and apologize to someone you’ve hurt.” His words were laced with meaning that Lapis didn’t want to comprehend.

“But that just isn’t how it works!” she protested, befuddled. An hour of intensive waterbending wasn’t exactly helping her comprehend things.

“Why?” Steven asked, staring out at the ocean.

“...why what?”

“Why is it ‘just that way?’ Why is it that if anybody so much as talks about changing something, it’ll all just fall apart? Do you even know why it would be bad if everybody fused? Why would anarchy erupt if people said please and thank you and appreciated other Gems? Why are Pearls just supposed to be… playthings?” Steven shrugged. “I dunno. Sure, if every pork chop were perfect we wouldn’t have hot dogs, but I want some pork chops with my hot dogs too.” Lapis just stared at him blankly. “...yeah, I figured that would be lost on you.”

The two just sat in silence for a few minutes. “Lapis?”

“Yes, my Steven?”

“Look at the sunset.”

Lapis quirked an eyebrow upwards. “What?”

“You heard me. Look at the sunset. Then… well, you might understand.”

What harm could it do? Lapis stared at the setting sun for a few moments. “I don’t see anything.”

Steven shook his head. “No, no. Really look at it, Lapis. Please.”

Pursing her lips, Lapis turned towards the sun again. The beauty came to her piece by piece. The golden hues, contrasting with the rich purples. The way the ocean reflected the light to create an endless sea of color. The clouds dancing in the sky.

“...wow,” she whispered, awestruck.

“I know, right?” Steven appeared lost in the bliss of the moment. “Now tell me something: when you worked for my mom, did you ever have time to look at the sunset? To just sit in the surf? To enjoy the beauty of wherever you went? Did anybody ever have that opportunity”

There were a hundred reasons why all of that was impractical, indolent, inefficient, a waste of time. But Lapis couldn’t bring any of them to mind. “No,” she answered.

“That’s what I want to change,” Steven said simply.
“...I think I get it now. Not all of it, but... enough,” Lapis replied after a moment of deliberation. “I… I really messed up, didn’t I? Pearl, your Pearl… she’s more than, a, a, well, Pearl. Isn’t she?”

Steven smiled. “Welcome to Earth, Lapis. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

Chapter End Notes

What do you guys think of the bombs that were dropped this episode? Please, let us know in the comments below, on the official BlueSwap Discord (https://discord.gg/kmNpaaH), on our Tumblr (https://blueswapuniverse.tumblr.com/), and make sure to update our TVTropes page (tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/CrystalClarity) with recent events!
Gold Experience

Chapter Summary

Steven buys a pet rock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a beautiful day. Birds were singing, waves crashed against the shore, and the sand glimmered like gold under the midday sun. It was the perfect day for a game of catch, but failing that, a kitschy open air market would do.

Steven raced around the corner of Dewey Street, his grin spreading from ear to ear. For the first time since his last hangout with Connie, Steven’s joy was genuine, not faked for his family’s benefit, and he was going to capitalize on the opportunity to have real fun no matter what.

He ground to a halt, a myriad of sensations washing over him in a beautiful, discordant cacophony: the sizzle of grease, the scent of musty toys, the yells of a bargain in the making, sugar floating in the air, and the friendly chatter of complete strangers combining to form something resembling a five-senses song that played throughout the beachfront. Lapis touched down beside Steven and Pearl, her wings making it far easier for her to keep up with her Diamond’s fleet feet than Greg. The poor man was still catching up, having been quickly outpaced by his son and Pearl once Steven began his sprint.

Lapis blatantly gawked at the mass of humanity, who returned the favor, showering the Gem in a cascade of camera flashes. “What is this place?”

“The County Fair!” Steven explained, gesturing to the hastily constructed wooden shacks and folding tables that covered every inch of the beach and boardwalk, stretching from the dustiest corner of Funland all the way to the Big Donut. “People come from all over the place to sell their junk and food and stuff that’s both at the same time every year to,” he glanced at Pearl out of the corner of his eye, “help bring the community together!” Although that was true, the actual purpose of the fair was to scam the summer tourists out of their money, though of course Pearl’s Diamond was too innocent to know that. He’d just have to explain it to Lapis later.

“Oh.” Lapis paused. “What’s the point of all of this, my Steven? This… stuff looks completely useless.”

“Well, you don’t really buy the junk for what it is. You buy it for what it probably isn’t! The point is to make up cool stories about this stuff, and imagine things about the person who had it.”

“I see.” Lapis clearly didn’t see.

As Lapis had pointed out, the various tables were laden with knickknacks of all kinds, and there were dozens of tantalizing scents mingling in the air. Steven’s stomach growled as the smell of fried sugar crept into his nostrils, but he managed to resist the temptation to run to the nearest unhealthy something-or-other vendor. The last time he’d gotten food from here, the grease-induced bellyache had lasted for days.
“Gee, kiddo, slow down for your old man, huh?” Greg panted, finally catching up with his son.

“Sorry! I’m just super excited,” Steven apologized, sheepish.

“Ah, it’s no problem, Schtu-ball,” his father said, ruffling Steven’s hair. He surveyed the beach, whistling. “Wow! This is the busiest I’ve seen it in the entire five years we’ve lived here. Who knows, we might actually find something halfway-decent this time around.” Greg and Steven chuckled as the family moved into the market.

“Yes, Greg, I believe-” She flinched as a brusque fairgoer brushed past her, nearly summoning her rapier from surprise. Pearl barely relaxed when he passed by.

“You alright, Pearl?” Steven asked, stopping to look up at his guardian. He was well aware that Pearl had difficulties with crowds, but she had insisted on coming despite Steven’s protestations. Yet another reminder of what- No. It was a day to have fun, not a day to ruminate upon all of the potential atrocities that Steven’s mother may have committed.

“I am fine, my Diamond,” she replied stiffly, standing rigidly at attention.

“You sure? You can go home if you want,” Steven said.

“I will be fine.”

Steven sighed under his breath. All he wanted was one day without being reminded of the long, long list of things that his mother broke that he had to fix, which had grown even longer when Lapis told him of what little she remembered of Homeworld. Even from the view of a nostalgic aristocrat with a foggy memory at best – she barely remembered anything at all from before the mirror - the anecdotes Lapis related were horrifying. Millions of Gems, toiling under the watchful eye of the regime, all to keep the powerful happy and complacent in their endless strings of parties. It was like a YA dystopia novel.

He just wished he knew how to help Pearl, but it was near-impossible to get her to actually listen to him and not just nod along like she must’ve been expected to back when she was… was… The very thought gave rise to a storm of anger within Steven that he just barely managed to tamp down. He had to keep smiling. Probably the most important lesson that Pearl ever taught him was how to hide his feelings for the benefit of others. All he had to do was smile, nod, laugh, and act like a doofus, and everyone would be happy. Including him. At least in theory.

Regardless of millennia-old injustices, nothing would stop Steven from having genuine fun when he had the opportunity. His eyes shining, Steven ran into what Mister Smiley had dubbed Haggle City. The vendors, as per usual, sold nothing but useless electronics (who would even buy a labelmaker cut in half vertically?), old toys from kids’ meals, furniture in poor condition with questionable stains, and other antique yet utterly valueless items being sold. Once or twice in the past four years, Steven managed to find something actually worthwhile – he still fondly remembered the time where he bought an old Project Jupiter with the accompanying cartridge collection and spent days afterward exploring the owner's old save files – but it seemed like he would have no such luck this time around. Hours of fruitlessly searching the stands yielded nothing even remotely interesting.

Despite the good company, his dad’s puns, Lapis’ snark, and the general friendly atmosphere of the fair, Steven’s interest waned. He could remember that for the past few years he was filled to bursting with pure excitement and glee at even the mention of the fair. But now it was just... fun, not a transcendental experience of absolute joy, and that was only because he had his family with him to keep him from getting bored.
Steven was ready to go home when something shined in the afternoon sun, catching his eye. That level of bling was rather unusual for the fair. Steven excitedly dragged his family towards a bored-looking vendor’s booth, which was covered in jewelry of all kinds. He turned towards the two blue Gems and asked, “Y’know, I've always meant to ask you guys something. How do Gems feel about jewelry?”

Pearl raised an eyebrow under her bangs. “They're just lifeless minerals, my Diamond, completely worthless compared next to true Gems. I do not see the similarities.”

“I was just a piece of lifeless jewelry a few weeks ago,” Lapis remarked drily.

“A-pologies, Clarity.” Pearl bowed low.

Steven gently elbowed Lapis in the side and cleared his throat. “Oh, um. No problem,” she said rather belatedly.

After a moment of awkward silence, Greg clapped a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Sooooo, does anything here catch your interest? Seeing something like this at the County Fair happens once in a blue moon! We shouldn’t pass this opportunity up.”

Steven nodded vigorously. “Yeah! Lemme take a look.” He began to peruse the table covered in cheap bling. The quality of the jewelry varied wildly; a necklace of pearls shared space with a cheap armband with a cracked blue stone, and sitting above those two was what must have been an engagement ring. There were too many rings to count, necklaces abound, and a plethora of earrings. Off to the left and right of the table were felt pouches and smooth, colorful rocks found typically in mom and pop gift shops.

“I dunno,” Steven concluded after a few minutes, shrugging. “Hey, Pearl, you want anything?” Steven already knew the answer, but could always hope that Pearl would prove him wrong.

“I do not require anything, my Diamond.” He barely suppressed his sigh of frustration.

Something stirred in his gem, and a particularly vibrant stone drew Steven’s eye. “Ooh! Actually, that one right there looks pretty cool,” he said, pointing to a violet and bubblegum pink pendant with mossy splotches.

The bored man reclining behind the stand immediately perked up, leaning forward to point at the boy’s choice. “Oh, that's a fine choice. You've got a good eye for minerals,” he said. “That right there is Pink Kona Dolomite, all the way up from Michigan. Do you see those green wispy things?”

“Sure do.”

“It's fossilized moss! Legend has it that they’re the crystallized souls of dryads.”

“That's pretty neat,” Greg said, stroking his beard. “Gee, you're pretty passionate about rocks, aren'tcha?”

The merchant bristled and glared at Greg. “Hey, pal. They’re minerals. I’m not running a con here. Even tourists aren’t gullible enough to buy shiny rocks.”

Steven immediately leapt to an appropriately silly thing to say to defuse the situation. “Like you, Pearl,” he remarked, looking back at the Gem and setting the necklace down. “Well, not like like you, but like you!”

“Pearl? That's a lovely name.” The mineral man wiggled his eyebrows.
The Gem nodded, visibly uncomfortable as she searched for the appropriate human response. “Oh. Um, thank you. Sir.”

Steven plucked the dolomite necklace from the table. “Honestly, this feels kinda weird,” he said. “But… I also feel like I should get some of these. It's my heritage, after all.”

“Ye- wait… What?” the man asked after a pregnant pause.

OxOxO

Steven tossed a rock-filled burlap bag from hand to hand as his newly-acquired dolomite necklace swung back and forth from his pacing. They hadn't returned with anything but nearly three pounds of pebbles and assorted jewelry from the market, which, to be fair, was a better than average haul. Greg had returned to the car wash to capitalize on the train of dirty cars that the surge of tourism brought after dropping Steven off at the Palanquin. Lapis, to everyone's surprise, accompanied him to practice her hydrokinesis. Steven had the sneaking suspicion that she still felt guilty about the Galaxy Warp incident, and was trying to fine tune her control so that something like that would never happen again. She had extended an invitation to Steven to join her in amazing the puny humans with basic hydrokinetic techniques, but something held him back, something tugging at the back of his mind that he just couldn't quite pin down.

Steven plucked a turquoise stone from the bag, sighing. On top of the normal mess of guilt and anxiety, Steven got the feeling that he was missing something important, no, crucial. He flopped down onto the steps leading up to the Palanquin's curtain and turned to Pearl. “How are gems made?” he asked, something telling him that he was heading in the right direction. He had always wanted to know, but she always chose her words carefully when it came to telling him anything relating to Homeworld. Not that it helped in “protecting” Steven in the end.

Pearl sat down next to him. “My Diamond, there are many ways to create Gems, but all but one of them have been rendered archaic by modern technology,” she started. “The efficient way is to inject an adaptive stone, akin to human stem cells, into the local bedrock in an especially prepared area that is roughly translated to the Earth word 'Kindergarten.' The Gem then emerges from the earth once they have absorbed enough minerals from the planet's soil and bedrock to form properly and generate a once-in-a-lifetime explosion of heat and kinetic force to blast them out of the hole. As is the problem with most forms of industrialization, there are rare... issues that are promptly taken care of, but it is the most efficient way of creating new Gems.”

He swallowed hard, clutching his t-shirt. “But… there are other ways, right? I mean, if I start making my own Gems with this 'Kindergarten' stuff, I'd feel pretty bad for the Gems who don't come out right. I mean, whoever made the first Gem had to have done it differently. What was it you mentioned about less efficient ways?”

Pearl pursed her lips, pondering the origin of Gem life. Pearls saw and heard many things that they weren't supposed to see and hear over their existences. However, this particular secret escaped her vast library of knowledge. “There are a variety of techniques to handcraft Gems that were prevalent before Kindergartens. However, Gem quality tended towards extremes. Handcrafted Gems are either exemplars of their type, but more often they're defective or completely dormant due to a small mistake during their formation. I've heard rumors that your mother also had the ability to spontaneously generate new Gems, but this process was... flawed in some way that I am not aware of, and was phased out before I was even formed. As for your first question, my Diamond, I… do not know. I do not believe even your mother was aware of the exact circumstances of the origins of our race.”

“Really? Gems are artificial. There had to be a first…” Steven gripped the pebble tightly between his
I wondered if I'll be able to make Gems one day.” The rock began vibrating in his hands. “I mean- uh, woah! Pearl! What's- HOLY GUACAMOLE!”

“What?!” Pearl cried as the turquoise began to glow. It wasn't possible. How could a Gem that small have the energy to reform after being dispersed?

They watched with wide eyes as the rock slowly took on a physical form, floating down to the grass. The small pebble of a... Gem... appeared to be a forest camouflage version of Little Red Riding Hood, wearing a hooded green cloak over a plain, miniature dress. The peculiar gem looked up at them with her grass green eyes, which were as glassy as Lapis' had been when she had first been freed.

“Wuh- huh- duh- bah-” Steven stuttered, crouching down in front of the Gem. She was barely six inches tall. He eventually settled on, “What?” The tiny Gem stared up at him.

“S-Steven.” Pearl silently hyperventilated, a nervous habit she picked up from humanity after the past few months' long series of harrowing experiences. “How-?! Stars above! You don't even...” She stared at the tiny Gem. Steven's talents often manifested in strange ways at unexpected times, but this was beyond anything that Pearl had ever seen in her life.

“I don't know, but she sure is cute!” he exclaimed, the initial shock passing. After a few moments of deliberation, Steven decided on the course of action that the Steven that Pearl thought he was would take, which, in all honesty, was somewhat appealing to him even now. “I have to make more!”

“W-wait,” Pearl objected, too quietly for him to hear.

Steven pulled out more stones, barely brushing his fingers against them before they started brilliantly glowing. Mere minutes later, after making dozens of these odd Gems, Steven flopped to the ground as he fought to keep his form, such an intense use of his power draining him. He admired the crowd of Gems from their height, smiling. “Man, making these babies... It feels like I ran three miles uphill covered in weights!” he said, forcing flippant cheer into his tone.

Pearl just stared at the tiny army, utterly dumbfounded. “Gems don't have an infantile stage,” is the only thing that she could think of in the face of such madness.

“Really? Then what are these guys? Your sketches never had anything this small. I think the Beryls were the shortest. But... these guys are like action figures!” Steven exclaimed.

The odd, pebblelike Gems came in all varieties. The tallest topped out at about eight inches head to toe, and the shortest were barely one. They were absolutely precious, and despite his exhaustion, their adorableness managed to lift Steven's spirits.

Steven flopped over onto his belly, holding out his hand to the smallest of the crowd. She was a frail looking thing with a red sundress. “Come here,” he whispered, and tentatively she hiked up onto Steven's hand.

He brought her close to his face, observing her features more closely. The boy’s eye was perfectly reflected in hers, just like how Lapis’ eyes were perfect mirrors when she first was freed. Were they... broken? Her face was shaped like an almond, and her hair was (proportionally) long and curly. She was only as tall as Steven's pinky finger.

Pearl was finally roused from her confusion by the achingly familiar sight of a Gem in her Diamond’s palm. The very sight drove a spike of grief into her heart.

The boy gently set her down. “So what do you guys like to do? Or- what's it like to be just made?”
None of the pebbles answered him. They all remained silent, blinking up at Steven or looking at one another. They were probably mute, then. “Pearl, do you think they'll listen to me?” Steven asked, looking back at her.

“I… Why not?” Pearl said, still somewhat dazed. “It wouldn't be the most unbelievable thing to happen today, my Diamond.”

He supposed she had a point. Steven jabbed a finger at the largest one, a yellow pebble. “Start digging a hole in the dirt. Oh, uh, please,” he ordered, motioning to a patch of grass near his feet. The yellow pebble nodded, moving to the spot to begin excavating.

“Wow,” he whispered. “I've got a little pebble army. I…” He really should have thought this through. What was he going to do with them now? And Pearl had said that there was a reason why Diamond-created Gems were phased out.

“Er-” Pearl mumbled. “My Diamond, these are extremely primitive Gems. Their capabilities are most likely limited.”

“Primitive?” he said, placing a finger over each ear of the nearest pebble to him. “Don't say that in front of them, Pearl! They're Gems just like you and me.” He gasped, jumping to his feet and pulling the pendant from his shirt. Steven's gem vibrated in anticipation, everything finally clicking into place. “That's right, I have this too! I wonder if this one will be a plant Gem. There's algae fossils in here or something.”

Steven delicately popped the rock out of the necklace. Taking a deep breath, he wiped sweat from his brow and said “This one is going to be special,” with absolute certainty. He brought the soon-to-be-Gem to his lips and kissed it for luck.

Almost immediately it began to glow and hover in the air. With a brilliant flash of red light, she finished forming and fell into Steven's outstretched hands, landing on her bottom. The tiny Dolomite blinked up at Steven, her magenta hair flowing in the breeze and her soft pink skin still glowing.

While in most ways she was similar to the others, what with her bodysuit matching a good half of the other’s forms, there was one thing that distinguished the Dolomite: her eyes. Unlike the rest, they were fully formed, with whites, pupils, and sclera. She wasn't... broken.

“Look,” he gasped, showing Pearl. “She's different from the others. Do you think my kiss made her special?”

“Perhaps,” Pearl remarked, leaning in to get another look. The Dolomite took a few tentative steps back at her scrutiny, staring up at Pearl fearfully. Blue Diamond's tears had always had special properties even before she began grieving for Pink. Perhaps the properties transferred to Steven's... dental fluid.

“Hmm…” he said, turning to look at the crowd. “You know... I wonder if…” A bout of dizziness struck Steven, and his form began to shift and warp before he forcefully compacted it. A stronger wave of nausea washed over him, followed by his limbs deadening from exhaustion. He stumbled to the ground, groaning.

“M-my Steven?!?” Pearl knelt next to him, checking his forehead.

“I'm… I'm okay… Just grab the- uh, the- barbecue sauce…” Steven's vision narrowed, faded, then turned completely black.

OxOxO
“Urgh… Dagobah…” Steven grumbled as he awoke, feeling like someone had tossed him through the car wash on its Stain Exterminator setting. Pearl and Lapis loomed over him, conversing in hushed tones. “What's wrong?” he asked, head throbbing. Steven attempted to get to his feet, and nearly fell flat on his face again before Pearl snatched him by the collar and steadied him.

“You passed out.” Lapis answered, frowning. In her hands she held the trembling Kona Dolomite. “That's like a rest period, right? It happens to Aang a lot.” Her cheeks darkened as Steven raised an eyebrow, impressed at Lapis' quick adaptation to geekdom. “Um, anyways. What's this?”

“She’s a… a… pebble!” Steven declared, gently taking her away from Lapis and holding her in his hands. She immediately relaxed, letting out a small sigh and leaning against his cupped fingers. “I made her.”

“She's kinda freaky,” Lapis said bluntly.

Kona Dolomite slumped, and tears threatened to spill from Steven's eyes as he briefly felt a pang of sadness and an all-too-familiar feeling of inadequacy. “She may be little, but she still has emotions, Lapis. She's more like us than we think,” he snapped, then rubbed his forehead with his free hand. It was becoming harder and harder not to break character as the days wore on. “Sorry 'bout that. My head’s killing me.”

“Riiiiiiight,” Lapis deadpanned. “I'm heading back to the wash. Apparently the whole thing's a lot more complicated than I thought, and since I lost the bet that I could clean ten cars in a minute, I owe Greg two weeks of work. I only came to make sure you two didn't drop the Palanquin into the ocean or something when Pearl called us and had a panic attack over the phone.”

“Fine,” Steven sighed. “We’re alright, go wash cars.”

When Lapis had taken off, Steven looked back up at Pearl. “So where did the others go?”

Pearl nodded, forcibly stopping the tremors in her hands. “I apologize, my Diamond. I was unable to prevent them from fleeing when you collapsed.” she said, a tinge of fear in her voice.

“We’d better go find them before they hurt themselves. Or somebody else.” Steven sighed. “Let's roll.”

The three made their way down the grassy hill, Dolomite held in Steven's hands. The tiny Gem glanced around her rapidly changing surroundings with wonder in her eyes, jaw agape at even the most mundane of sights.

When they reached the bottom, the entire town was eerily silent. Not a soul was outside. If Steven's life was a cliched Western, a tumbleweed would be rolling down Main Street.

His anxiety flared. Steven had seen this many times before, when the Crystal Gems were engaged in a battle long-lasting and destructive enough to warrant the normally apathetic citizens of Beach City to lock themselves inside their homes and call their insurance companies for their policies on Acts of Gem. If it was that bad, people were probably already hurt and it was his-

A light, warm touch brushed against his thumb, slowing his frantic heart. Steven glanced down to see Dolomite reassuringly patting it, staring up at Steven with a kind smile.

“Where do you think they could be?” Pearl asked, interrupting Steven and Dolomite's moment. A scream echoed from the beach, answering her question. Eyes wide, Pearl and Steven raced towards the boardwalk, Kona Dolomite held carefully in Steven’s hands.
They were not met with a pretty sight. The County Fair had been demolished, most of its stalls smashed, cut into pieces, or cleanly bisected. Tourists and vendors fled the scene, scrambling out of wrecked booths and stumbling over piles of overpriced junk. Steven helped a portly man out of the rubble as he and Pearl sped towards the center of the chaos.

Steven barely managed to dodge a purple blur flying through the air, which crashed into the remains of a fried dough cart. Amethyst groaned and staggered to her feet, ever so slightly punch drunk, and Dolomite squeaked at the sudden surprise. She soon overcame her fear and peeked over Steven's cupped hands at the new Gem, her head cocked to the side quizzically. Growling, Amethyst roared and shapeshifted into a hulking wrestler before leaping back into the fray. Steven and Pearl worriedly glanced at each other before following the purple Quartz, Pearl summoning her rapier as she ran.

The Crystal Gems were engaged with a towering enemy, the giant humanoid easily having a foot and a half on Rose Quartz. Covered in innumerable multicolored gemstones and eyeballs, the glimmering Gem lashed out with reckless abandon, her flowing mane of glimmering hair fluttering in the wind as she kicked Garnet across the beach. Dolomite whimpered at the sight, and Steven absently pet her.

Steven glanced at Pearl, swallowing a lump forming in the back of his throat. “I guess they really are an army.”

Pearl growled in frustration, astounded at her stupidity. “Of course. These 'pebbles' don't have enough mass within their gems to maintain an independent sentience, so they link together in a hive mind to accomplish complex tasks. But when their leading mind – you in this case, my Diamond – is cut off, they go berserk without guidance. That's why they were phased out. The Diamonds couldn't personally oversee every single Gem under their command.” She pursed her lips, analyzing the battlefield in a blink of an eye, and frowned, puzzled at the situation. “Why aren't they attacking it? They're more than capable of defeating her if they simply tried.” Indeed, the Crystal Gems were dancing around the fusion, fending off blows but never actually making an offensive.

“They're afraid of hitting the Gemstones!” the boy realized. “Look, she's covered in them. She's like a disco ball! An angry, huge disco ball!”

“Gems are not easily shattered. They can be cracked under stress, but it takes a massive amount of force to break a Gem into pieces.” Pearl said, still confused.

“Yeah, but those gift shop rocks break into a million pieces if you throw them at the ground,” Steven explained.

“How would the Crystal Gems know about their origin?”

Before Steven could answer, Amethyst was sent sailing once again, landing a few dozen feet behind them. “Hey, you guys are missing all the action! This thing just showed up and started wrecking the place.”

Steven stumbled over the remains of the County Fair to meet her, presenting the quivering Dolomite to Amethyst. “I made those Gems! Don't hurt them!”

“Whaaaaaaa?” Amethyst shook her head. “You can explain what other cool space power you got later. We’ve got a weird fusion thingy to take down.” The purple Quartz bounded back into the fray. “Uh, guys, keep on not hurting Quadruple Rainbow!” she cried. “Steven says that he made her!”

“We’d better finish this quickly,” Rose shouted, barely managing to block a punch with her shield. She grunted, her feet leaving deep grooves in the sand as the fusion forced her backwards. “We can’t
keep this up for long, and I think we've got a lot to talk about.”

Steven sprinted towards the battle, Pearl following close behind to fend off the fusion if need be. He waved his hands in front of the fusion, ducking a wild haymaker aimed at the white Pearl. “Hey, you guys can stop!” It appeared as if they were no longer taking orders, as they casually back-kicked Amethyst, sending her on a home run for the third time that day. They did however, focus most of their eyes on him, their suddenly manifested pupils all looking at him in a distinctly unsettling way. “Guys! Please!” Steven pleaded.

Garnet crashed into the sand from a dozen feet in the air, returning from her all-expenses paid trip to Fish Stew Pizza's roof with a perfect three-point landing. She slid to the back of the fusion in a blink of an eye, lining up a megaton punch to an unarmored point on the fusion's body.

Time seemed to slow down. Most of the fusion’s dozens of eyes shifted their focus towards Garnet. Then, it contorted its studded arms backward, each of its strikes lined up perfectly with Ruby’s gem.

Far faster than what Steven had given her credit for, the Dolomite leapt out of his hand and towards Garnet, directly in the path of the fusion’s attack. Garnets gaunted hand collided with the pebble, impacting her gem with immense force. Steven would never forget the sound it made when her gemstone was split in two. It was like a thousand mirrors cracking at once. Both fusions pulled back in surprise, the battle forgotten.

The Pink Kona Dolomite shattered.

“Oh my!” Pearl exclaimed, clapping her hands over her mouth. Her rapier dropped to the ground, forgotten.

A silence fell over the entire beach. Garnet’s jaw fell slack, and Steven were certain all three of her eyes were wide under her visor.

Steven walked forward, picking up the two halves somberly. He calmly swept away the waves of blue grief that threatened to explode from his gem as the pebbles fell apart, each individual surrounding the boy. None of them needed to speak for Steven to understand that the pebbles had suddenly been introduced to two new concepts: regret and grief.

Garnet’s gauntlets disappeared in an instant. She opened her mouth several times to speak. “I- I- She-”

“It wasn't your fault, Garnet,” Rose immediately told the other Crystal Gem, her voice gentle. “She threw herself in the way to save you. It was her choice.”

Garnet calmed down, but tears still threatened to spill from her eyes. She cast her head downwards “Yes, you're right. I just-”

Steven sighed, scanning the crowd of pebbles. “I think you all should go.”

“Wait-” Amethyst began.

“We don't have space for all of you,” Steven said simply. “You don't belong to me. You should make a life for yourselves. If that means you're going to some far off magical forest, that's okay. If that means staying around here, that’s alright too. And...” he teared up slightly. It was completely illogical for Steven to have formed such an intense emotional bond with Kona in less than fifteen minutes, but... something had happened. He could remember the pebble's tears forming in his eyes. “…and try to understand what Kona did for you. For all of you.”
Not a single Gem, Crystal or otherwise, spoke.

Steven watched solemnly as the sea of pebbles washed past him, moving toward the city. Like a river, they flowed seamlessly, careful to avoid the emerging residents and the panicking tourists. Steven could spot Mayor Dewey in the distance, crying on his knees and begging for the rapidly fleeing visitors to come back next summer.

“Arrivederci…” he muttered, staring down at the halves of Kona. Yet another tragedy to add to the ever-growing list. But this time, the shards were on his own hands.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, what a zinger. Packed with jojo references and death and wow. Major props to the writing team for this one.

Discord at /kmNpaaH
Mother (a what-if scenario)

Chapter Summary

Warning. This chapter comes before you in a very rough state. It was made in April before chapter one of crystal clarity. This was to preserve why we didn't use it. This is not how it would go if Blue survived in the crystal clarity continuity, we just wanted everyone to see it rather than making a new story. Reader discretion advised.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steven sat back in the comfy seat of his father's van. He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. Dreary days like this could even bring someone with his immense well of positivity down. It did not go unnoticed by the others in the car.

“You okay there, Shtu-ball?” his bearded father queried, glancing at him through the rear view mirror.

Greg Universe was one of the most popular rock stars of the past decade. He wasn't nearly as well known as some of the musicians of the newest decade, but even those who didn't listen to music knew some of his songs. They were catchy tunes often used in commercials.

Long ago had he semi-retired, focusing on a quiet life for his blue-eyed son. But of course, they had the occasional show.

Steven nodded. “Yeah. The weather’s just got me a little down. We’re supposed to do a concert in a beach town?”

“Beach City.” the blue woman with hair that obscured her eyes supplied in her whispery voice. “ Haven't you been here before, Greg?”

“Oh, yeah!” he chuckled. “When I was twenty-two, I had a little gig here before I went to Empire City. Then that led me to being famous, which led to my world tour, which led me to your mother.”

His hair was medium length, and straight. However, it curled at the ends. Much like his mother had.

Blue Diamond sat next to him, in her robe, softly stroking his hand. Her size had greatly diminished, as he was told, because he took part of her power. As a result, both mother and child had Gems identical in all ways.

However she was very frail, for a gem that is. She was lucky the power had been split and not completely inherited. Any being less than a Diamond surely would have perished.

Steven adjusted the seat belt over his dark shirt, and the gem that took up most of his sternum. His shirt had a cut out that both displayed his gem and incorporated it into the yellow star on his shirt.

He looked out the window.

There he noticed several dozen cars in the opposite lane moving away from the town.
“Where do you suppose they're all going in a rush?” Blue Diamond confusedly asked.

Pearl looked ahead, gasping. It surprised the humans, because it was perhaps the loudest the soft spoken gem had ever been.

Greg followed her limp finger, spotting a green hand in the sky. “Is that..?”

“Dad? Pearl? What is that? A hand?” he queried with the curiosity of a child.

“That's a diamond warship.” Pearl breathed.

Greg glanced at her. “You sure? Would they be friendly?”

“I ran away.” Blue said in her sad voice. “I'm not sure if I'm welcome.”

“They're Gems!” Steven surmised. “Can we go meet them? Maybe they can help me unlock my powers!”

“You're essentially gem royalty!” Greg exclaimed. “You have to understand that Homeworld wasn't exactly keen on the earth!”

“You're not turning around.” Pearl noticed softly. “I would like to go home.”

Blue nodded. “It would be nice to return, to see how things have been. But what will they say now that I'm so small?”

The boy chuckled, because she was almost seven feet tall.

Steven steeled his gaze. “Come on, dad. We can go live in space and really be the Universes!”

“Steven!” he yelled. “This is too sudden!”

“I don't technically exist, dad!” Steven pointed out. “Please, I'm completely in tune with my human side. Can I do the same with my gem side?”

Greg sighed, gripping the wheel. “Fine. Alright, I guess if they're friendly, we're going to space.”

Blue Diamond nodded. She was happy with her new life, but this planet would always be where Pink perished.

Steven smiled, feeling increasingly more exhilarated as they approached the city. So did the hand, and everything was tinted green.

They drove to meet it, and Steven was eager to leave. His mother trekked behind him. Pearl was close behind them. Greg, being middle aged but not out of shape, lagged slightly behind.

That was when he stopped abruptly.

Three large Gems stood across from the warship. He couldn't make out their colors due to the green light.

One was larger than the others, with four arms and a bow. The second tallest was wearing a dress and had flowing hair. She wielded a shield and sword.

The smallest was a rather large gem with a cubic hairstyle.
Steven looked back to Pearl as the ship touched down. It gave him time to notice a few things. They were in front of a very large statue that was mountain sized.

None of the Gems had noticed them yet.

He and Pearl were not fighters in the slightest.

“Brace yourselves!” someone yelled from the beach.

Greg shielded his son as sand was sent flying everywhere.

Being a pearl, Pearl used her ability to manipulate sand to shield them from the small projectiles.

When the dust settled, the hand opened up. An orb came from the wrist, opening to reveal three gems.

The one with limb enhancers pointed at the trio on the beach that had become a quartet. “That's them, alright. They're the ones who keep breaking my machines!”

Steven had no clue as to what was going on, nor how no one had noticed them.

The tallest gem with flowing curly hair spoke in a strong voice. “This isn't a Gem-controlled planet anymore! In the name of the Crystal Gems, leave this place!”

Steven gasped loudly. “Crystal Gems?!”

All eyes were on him. Pearl stood tall.

“Rose…” the Amethyst trailed off.

The gem who was presumably Rose Quartz tilted her head in confusion and curiosity. “What are you?”

He blushed. “Uhh. My name is Steven. This is Pearl and my dad.”

The largest gem on the hand gasped, focusing on them. “Blue Diamond!”

Most everyone else gasped and murmured.

“I am Blue Diamond.” she announced. “I thought I'd destroyed you all, after what you did.” she coldly said.

The Garnet adjusted her shades. “This is…”

“Rose Quartz and the missing diamond?” Jasper laughed. “It's my lucky day. Your clarity, please come here. We can eradicate these traitors and return you to homeworld.”

“No.” Rose declared. “I'm afraid Steven isn't going with you. However, I will allow you to leave this place if you never return.”

Peridot snickered. “Firing barrage.”

Steven watched with bated breath as the finger fired a laser at the people he assumed to be criminals. So, in the confusion, he started a run to the ship. Pearl and his parents followed.
A smaller hand emerged from the ship as a platform to raise them up.

All three gems on the hand saluted him.

“If you'll just allow me to collect their gems, we can be off.” Jasper requested.

He was about to awkwardly ‘grant’ it, but the dust settled. Rose Quartz had summoned a large shield, protecting everyone on the beach from harm.

Blue seethed. She loathed that Rose Quartz.

Jasper cracked her neck, jumping down. “Looks like I'll have to do this the hard way.”

“No!” Steven shouted.

She froze in mid punch.

“Steven?” Blue queried.

“Leave them alone. They aren't hurting anyone.” he begged. Even if they were dangerous rebels that his mother despised, they were still people.

Rose raised an eyebrow.

Blue glared at them. “You're incredibly lucky I love my son more than I loathe you, Rose Quartz. Be glad I've moved on.”

The words sent chills down his spine.

“Alright. Setting a course for the kindergarten.” Peridot said.

In seconds, a green orb enveloped all on the hand save for Greg. Before he knew it, he was in the green hallways of a ship.

“Where have you been, your clarity? And please forgive me in advance, but why are you smaller?” the large orange Quartz asked.

“I halved my power in bringing Steven to existence.” she answered, lowering her hood, “I just want to go home.”

“I can vouch.” Pearl said in her whispery voice. “I am her pearl, and he has her gem.”

Even the depressed and silent Lapis Lazuli was shocked.

Jasper cocked her head. “What? You're half human?”

Peridot brought her screen up, holding it in front of Steven and Pearl. Her eyes went wide. “I can confirm that these are Blue Diamond and her Pearl,”

Jasper’s yellow eyes went wide. “I'm sorry for my rudeness. Peridot, forget about the mission. We have meet with Yellow Diamond.”

“That is acceptable.” Blue announced.

Pearl leaned down into his ear. “Your ‘aunt’.”

“Greg.” the tall diamond breathed.
“What about my dad?” he asked, causing the peridot that was walking away to stop.

The green gem raised an eyebrow. “What? The human that tried to come along? My Diamond, his organic body wouldn't survive the warp.”

Steven knit his brows with concern. Blue Diamond grasped his hand lovingly, sending soothing waves with small rubs. It spoke volumes despite her silence and stillness.

“Crystal Gems love humans. They won't hurt him. We can come back with a safer ship later, Steven. I must rest.” Blue said.

Childbirth had significantly weakened her once great form.

Jasper assured. “Allow me to take this Lapis to her cell, and I'll show you to the bridge. Peridot, set a course for Yellow Diamond’s ship.”

“Wait, what did she do?” Steven queried, motioning to the shy blue gem. “She was with you when you landed.”

“She's an informant. The Crystal Gems kept her trapped in a mirror and accidentally released her. She flew back to Homeworld and we brought her along.” Jasper answered dutifully.

“Well if she hasn't done anything wrong, don't put her in a cell.” Steven reasoned, realizing he had some power over them. Although he didn't want to abuse it, he figured it was an alright use. “I know I wouldn't like it if I just was kept prisoner and passed around.”

Jasper let out a growl that was barely audible.

Lapis bowed. “Thank you, your clarity.” So she took a place next to Pearl.

Steven shrugged. “Let's go to the bridge.

Peridot ran ahead, disappearing behind a corner.

Jasper turned to speak. “Do you-”

Blue Diamond held a hand up to silence her. “Please, no small talk. I just would like to see Yellow.”

Pearl pursed her lips at this development. Her stride was dignified compared to the awkward and depressed shambling of the Lapis Lazuli.

“I saw the renegade pearl.” Pearl pointed out quietly.

Jasper made no move to reprimand her, because blue pearl belonged one of the highest ranking Gems. She had already angered Blue Diamond, what could she say?

“That pearl was annoying.” finally spoke Lapis. “She was loud and wouldn't stop talking into my mirror,”

“That sounds awful.” Steven sympathized. “But at least you're out now, right?”

Lapis Lazuli was surprised with this Blue Diamond's openness. She felt surprisingly comfortable around what would have usually put her on edge. The gem chalked it up to Steven being so small. Smaller than her, in fact.
Lapis looked up. “I spent thousands of years trapped in that mirror.”

Steven looked kindly to her. “I’m sorry.”

Jasper cleared her throat. “Peridot just jumped the ship. We’ll be there very soon, my Diamond.”

“Excellent. Thank you Jasper.” Blue nodded.

“What happens to me when we get back to Homeworld?” Lapis asked, her throat dry.

The boy could tell she didn't have very high hopes. So he pulled from his knowledge of gem culture.

“Well, I'll need a capital Planet, right? You can shape it.” Steven suggested. It was all wishful thinking, and he had no intention of ruling anything, but he knew it would most likely spare the Lapis Lazuli.

Blue pursed her lips at his baseless kindness. She had taught him to be kind, as Greg had shown her, but he didn't know the full story. Or even if there was one for that matter.

In all honesty, he just wanted to meet his gem side, not integrate himself. He knew they conquered planets, but he also knew that very rarely did those planets have sentient life.

Above all else, he just wanted his father back,

Jasper silently led the Diamond and her entourage to the throne room, leaving with Lapis.

Blue almost collapsed, leaning against the wall for support.

Pearl rushed to her side, opting to touch and assist her. Taboos had lost all their meaning to the gem and her servant on earth.

“Mom?” Steven worriedly asked.

The Diamond’s form momentarily flickered, but then she stood tall. “There is no more need for concern than usual.”

Steven hugged her, and she bent down to reciprocate. “I love you, Mom.”

“And I, you, my Steven.” she lovingly assured. “Oh, how I wish you could've met Pink. Fate had other plans. I'm grateful Greg taught me to move on. It has lessened the sting.”

Pearl cleared her throat quietly. “Yellow Diamond won't be pleased about your disappearance…”

“You're entirely right.” Blue said. “But I know my sister loves me. I've high hopes for our encounter. But… I cannot help feeling anxious. Steven, I appreciate your attempts to spare the Lapis.”

“She clearly didn't do anything wrong.” Steven realized.

Blue ran her fingers through his curly hair. The ends of his hair were like the two gatherings that curled onto her face.

“I'm proud of the person you're becoming.” she admitted softly.

Steven looked down. “I can't even use any of your powers.”

“I said the person, not the warrior. There are gems who don't fight that are perfectly good.” Blue
assured him.

Pearl nodded. “Such as myself.” she quietly bragged.

Blue smiled at the humble boast. “Steven, your kindness is unknown on Homeworld. Please, keep quiet and I will do the talking. Can you do that?”

He nodded fiercely. “Serious Steven time.”

The Diamond giggled slightly at her son. “Never change.”

“All humans do is change.” he reminded her.

“That’s the only thing that doesn't.” Blue said. “Now. Do you know the reason for my anger toward Rose Quartz?”

“Not really. Does it have to do with her being the leader of the rebellion? I still can't believe we were so close!” Steven exclaimed.

“She shattered Pink.” she painfully revealed. “Earth is such a strange world. Where else would something as fragile as a human thrive where a being as powerful as a Diamond perished? I understand why she wanted to defend it now, but she went too far.”

“I wish I could have met Aunt Pink.” Steven said. “But then you wouldn't have met dad, or had me.”

“Yes.” Blue smiled, uncaring of the silent pearl. “I wouldn't change a thing.”

The boy’s face fell. “Uh oh.”

“Steven?” Pearl worriedly asked.

Blue Diamond raised an eyebrow, fully exposing her kite pupils. No longer were the bags under her eyes from crying, they were from weakness.

“I have human needs!” he exclaimed. “Are there space bathrooms and space food?!”

“You'll manage.” Blue assured him. “We have the technology to keep you alive.”

The Human Zoo was an example of this, but she did not tell him. Some things she regretted too much here in the present, knowing what she did.

“Aw, man. I forgot my Grintendo and stuff!” he complained.

He supposed he was too excited. Steven knew that space would keep him entertained, but he hadn't finished the newest Pocketmon game.

Blue grinned knowingly. “I'm sure we could introduce the concept of video games to gem society.”

Steven’s blue eyes went wide. “Oh my gosh, I hadn't even considered that!”

Pearl made a noise of realization. She was a simple gem, and had immense patience. As such, on the rare occasion she allowed herself recreational time, she enjoyed laid back games. Farming simulators or puzzle games.

Blue Diamond just liked anything her fascinating son did. She had no idea if Steven’s life was finite, so she enjoyed spending time with him. The Diamond didn't know if she could stand the thought of
losing the two humans that were important to her.

“Of course you didn't. You're an innocent child, and your abilities to see around you are limited. There's nothing wrong with being so focused on what's in front of you at your age. Greg tells me.” Blue assured.

“How the heck did you even meet him anyway? Dad never wants to talk about it.”

Pearl snickered. “That's because she almost abducted him like in that movie.”

Blue nodded, smiling. “Eighteen years ago was a very dark time for me…. But, I suppose this is quite the occasion to open up…”

Steven sat down, crossing his legs. Pearl did the same.

“Story for Steven?” he queried.

Chapter End Notes

This is the Doomkitten, one of the cowriters for Crystal Clarity, speaking. With school kicking in for Sergeant Plopp and I, we no longer have as much time to dedicate as we want to writing the fic. For example, the last chapter, Gold Experience, was edited entirely in two days, and I barely got any sleep. It's become increasingly apparent that we need a new writer, and because of this, we are looking for a new writer. And, to increase our pool of applicants, we're selecting one in the form of a contest!

I have selected a series of mystery prompts that I will release weekly after the fic begins updating again, beginning with the first new chapter. You must have written, edited, and submitted a full response to the prompt precisely a week after I have given it at 11:59 P.M. To submit your piece of writing, please upload it to a Google Doc and PM Sarge and I for our eMails. We'll give them to you so you can share the doc with us. After everyone has submitted their responses, Plopp and I will read them over, leave feedback, and publish the best one, unedited, as a Crystal Clarity canonized side story as a reward for those with exemplary work who may not get selected as our writer. Your responses must fit canon to be canon, so PM your ideas to us in advance so we can tell you if something contradicts it. After I have released four such prompts, Plopp and I will evaluate all of a writer's responses as a whole, and select the winner from the one who demonstrates the most talent and potential.

We are giving you guys some time to warm up! Two weeks to be precise. We have a few silly practice prompts for you guys to work on. The first is "An Avatar: The Last Airbender or Avatar: The Legend of Korra fanfiction as written by Lapis." The second is "Connie GMs a tabletop role-playing game for Pearl, Lapis, Steven, and Greg." The third, for those of you who aren't schooled in the other two topics, is "Lapis discusses eating with Amethyst." You may submit any number of responses for any number of these prompts, and like in the contest, the best result will be canonized and released as an official side story. Get that to us by two weeks time.
Do It For Him

Chapter Summary

Connie goes over to the palanquin.

Chapter Notes

Discord at kmNpaaH, tumblr is Blueswapuniverse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A howling wind blasted Steven and Amethyst across the beach, kicking up loose sand in its wake. The gale momentarily relented, and the two, dazed, stumbled to their feet. “You good, Ste-man?” Amethyst asked, forming her whip in a flash of purple light. Steven simply nodded and tightened his grip on his khopesh. Bracing themselves, the two charged to rejoin the fray.

Pearl flew towards them, carried by a shrieking torrent of air. Steven’s hand twitched, and a dripping pillar of saltwater rose from the ocean, knocking Pearl out of the wind. Amethyst slid across the sand to catch the other Gem, gently letting her down on the sand when she fell into Amethyst’s arms. Pearl nodded at Amethyst in thanks, and the two joined Steven in his sprint towards the battle.

They quickly closed the distance, dodging the forceful gales and ducking under stray lasers and lightning strikes as they ran. When the three skidded to a stop, the other gems were barely holding their ground against the giant, absurdly pink and green pufferfish. White Pearl had thrust her spear into the sand, her hand vicelike around its haft as she desperately dug her heels into the ground. Garnet and Rose fared little better, stumbling back from the sheer force that the beast produced with its winds.

Steven, Amethyst, and Pearl rushed the monster’s exposed side, but it simply bounced, completely avoiding their attack. It continued its assault, and with a small yelp, White Pearl lost her grip. For a terrifying split-second, she hurtled towards the ocean.

Then a giant hand erupted from the sea and brusquely flicked her back onto the shore with its middle finger. Shortly thereafter, Lapis completed a perfect three-point landing, leaving a crater in the beach. With a casual sweep of her arm, the water construct shot forward and punched the gem monster straight into the sky, leaving it a twinkle on the horizon.

“You- you-” White Pearl sputtered, glaring at Lapis. “What did you think you were doing? We’re just going to have to deal that thing later!”

Lapis rolled her eyes. “I’m not an idiot. You obviously needed to regroup or that thing would’ve dispersed all of you at the very least, and even if I don’t really care about that that, my Steven would be broken up about it for weeks. So get yourselves together and head to your ‘Temple.’ If I aimed right, it’s landed there by now.”

All the color drained from Steven’s face. “You knocked it over to the Temple?”
Lapis shrugged. “Yeah. What’s the problem with that?”

“That’s where I was gonna meet Connie today!”

A bloodcurdling scream split the air.

OxOxO

Connie trembled beneath the shadow of the globular monster, her mind racing but her body refusing to move. This is how she was going to die. Connie Maheswaran would go down in history as the only girl who was impaled by a giant, neon pufferfish.

At least she would set a record.

Letting out what must have been a gigantic sigh, it began rolling towards Connie, seemingly oblivious to her presence. Every nerve screamed for her to run, to move, to do anything, but the rest of her body refused to listen.

Five seconds stretched into an eternity as the rolling ball of spikes slowly drifted towards her. Five seconds, five breaths, and when monster was maybe an inch away from killing her, a purple blur smashed into Connie, knocking her out of the pufferfish’s path.

She just took a moment to soak up the sun outside of the beast’s shadow, heedless of the flurry of activity around her. Somewhere far, far away, there were anguished yells, and the soft pop of a Gem poofing. Then another.

When the ringing in her head subsided, Steven was looming over her, face drawn. “-okay? Connie! Please, answer-”

“I’m fine,” she croaked.

Steven pulled her up to her feet. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Connie paused for a moment. The Crystal Gems, Pearl, and Lapis were all accounted for, all of them in various stages of recovery. Rose was sitting against the cliff face, sneaking forlorn glances at the white Pearl. White Pearl was on her spear, sneaking forlorn glances at Rose. Lapis was just looking bored, examining her nonexistent nails. Pearl was trembling with whatever the Gem equivalent of exhaustion was, though, as always, she was at attention. Garnet was as stoic as ever, but her armor (skin? chitin?) bore scuffs and scratches like the rest of the Gems. And Amethyst… Amethyst…

Amethyst’s gem was cradled in Rose’s hands.

Connie gasped, hands flying to her mouth in horror. Steven opened his mouth to inquire as to the cause of Connie’s distress, glanced in the direction her gaze was fixed, and opted to instead ask, “What's the matter? You know that gems don't die when that happens. Remember when-”

“Of course I remember,” Connie snapped, then sighed, hanging her head. “It's just- she got… poofed or dispersed or whatever for saving me! Amethyst is going to be gone for weeks because I froze up!”

The white Pearl let out a scoff. “I assure you that Amethyst will not take as long as myself or Pearl. If anything, she doesn't craft a form, she rushes her-”

Rose Quartz nodded, holding Amethyst’s glowing Gem where everyone could see. It let out a brilliant flash of white light, hovering in the air. “Amethyst is punctual, what can we say?”
The violet gem crashed to the sand, bouncing back upward into a fighting stance. Amethyst blinked a few times, regaining her bearings, before settling into her usual lopsided grin. “Heh- what'd I miss?”

“See?” White Pearl motioned to amethyst. “No harm done, and she's even got a new form. And- ah, you fixed that stray strap that was always bothering me!”

Sure enough, Amethyst was now clad in a black tank top, with no straps hanging loosely off her shoulders. Her pants were the same, as were her boots. “Not like I did it for you! I just… happen to like it when my shirt doesn't fall off! It- It distracted me when in battle!”

Steven and Connie burst into giggles, their amusement echoing through the Beach City area.

OxOxO

Connie stared intently at her own hand, then at the cards held in Steven’s. A sly smile crept onto her face as she glanced up at the boy’s large, reflective pupils. “Do you… have any fives?”

Steven gasped. “Dangit! How do you do that? Are you secretly a mind reader like Jay Ash?”

“Yes,” Connie deadpanned, trying her hardest to resist snickering.

“Wowie! Then… what am I gonna do next?”

She sat on the question. “Next you'll say: nope, that's not it!”

“Nope, that's- what?” His eyes shone. “AAAAH! THAT'S SO COOL.” Grinning mischievously, Steven said, “Gee, knowing that you can scan my brain at any time is making me real… nerve-ous.”

It took a moment for Connie to process his pun, but her own eyes began shining once she picked up on it. “You really want to start this, mister? Fine! You sure you aren’t the telepath here, because I don’t think I told you how much I lobe brain puns!” she fired back.

Steven groaned. “Okay, okay, that’s enough of bad puns! Two wrongs don’t make a dendrite, after all.”

Connie laughed in spite of herself. “That one was a stretch, and you know it.”

“Yeah, it was, but you wouldn’t stop making terrible geology puns during our second hangout! I think I’m entitled to a little bit of leeway,” Steven retorted.

“I wasn’t that bad, was I?”

“Yeah, you were,” Steven answered. “You were stone-cold ruthless with those babies.”

“Okay, okay,” Connie got up and brushed some imaginary dust off of her skirt. “Wanna go play something else? When I can see your hand reflected in your eyes, Go Fish gets pretty boring. Also, I told you that, and I'm wearing glasses.”

He nodded, catching himself. “Su- wait, what? Are you kidding me?!” Steven exclaimed.

Connie shrugged. “It's not against the rules to use your head. Or- in this case, a friend’s head. It's not like I was sneaking cards up my sleeve. Your pupils are bigger than the average person’s with their unique shape.”

“I guess you're right,” Steven said. “Hm... Oh! Have you heard of Legacy Guardians?”
Connie’s eyes widened. “Woah! Pearl lets you play that?”

Something flashed across Steven’s eyes, too fast for Connie to analyze. “Um, yeah. Anyways, wanna play? The co-op campaign just got released today and-”

Connie grasped Steven’s arm, eyes serious. “Steven, my mom doesn’t let me play violent games.” He drooped, disappointed. “However, due to the Lutes and Loot Act, ratified after several weeks of lobbying on the part of my father, she has made an exception as long as an adult plays with me,” She winked.

OxOxO

The character that Connie was playing had three distinct death screams, each playing randomly when she got impaled, burnt, eviscerated, bisected, bludgeoned, or knocked across the map. Connie had documented thirteen instances of the first scream (a surprised yelp), seven of the second (a long, drawn out wail), and twenty-three of the third (a rather disturbingly realistic death gurgle).

She had recorded none of the above for either Steven or Pearl.

Lost in her own self-pity, Connie failed to notice the massive fireball hurtling towards her avatar, and was greeted with another death rattle. Oh. It was a pitiful wheeze. That was new. Connie was fairly certain that the game was telling her she should just give up and get a job as a cabbage merchant.

Steven, of course, was there to save her like always. “Connie! Don’t worry, I’ll revive you. Pearl, hold the left flank while I get to Connie’s position,” Pearl nodded in response, her fingers flying across her controller. Perhaps what made Connie’s incompetence more piteous is that Pearl, a Gem with no experience in video games, was somehow managing to completely outclass Connie on her first time playing this ludicrously overcomplicated mess of meters, combos, super moves, limit breaks, and every other hack ‘n slash trope that the designers could stuff into the game.

As soon as Steven made it to her part of the battlefield, his own character was suddenly pierced with dozens of enemy arrows from an unseen archer battalion, leading to his own doom. He winced, and Pearl was just startled enough for her concentration to slip, causing her own demise. “Flip on a stick…” he muttered. “We were so close to the end!”

For whatever reason, the bloody Game Over screen made Connie a little bit nauseous.

OxOxO

She awoke to a feeling that she hadn’t felt since, well, since she was a little(r) kid. A nameless, baseless dread constricted her breathing, the certainty that something undetectable was there, silently looming over her with her fate in its hands making Connie break out into a cold sweat.

It was probably just a remnant of her harrowing experience earlier that day. Or yesterday. It was difficult to tell without a clock. Connie counted herself lucky to be lying on Steven’s couch at all, not only because of her brush with death-by-pufferfish, but by all rights she should’ve been having this panic attack in her own bed. Her mother’s flight back to Delmarva from the conference she was speaking at got delayed, and considering that Connie’s father was still hung up working a security gig at some cheese factory or another, Priyanka had no choice but to let Connie sleep at her mysterious friend’s house for the night, despite her misgivings that were blatantly obvious over the phone.

Connie exhaled, shaking her head at such silly notions of a silent stalker stealing children’s souls in the middle of the night, and turned over to go back to sleep. “Greetings,” breathed a voice from the
darkness. Nope nope nope definitely a nightmare. Connie was about to scream when a cold hand clamped over her mouth. “Apologies for frightening you. I am going to turn on the light, and we are going to have a civil conversation. Can I trust you to remain quiet?”

Connie glared at the darkness, and reluctantly nodded. A soft blue light began glowing, seemingly suspended in midair, before revealing Pearl. Connie relaxed, but only slightly. “Pearl! Why did you scare me like that?” she hissed.

“That was not my intention,” Connie breathed a sigh of relief. “However, if intimidation is required to get my point across, I will not hesitate to use it.” Fear crawled into her heart once more.

“W-what do you mean?” Connie said, a small portion of her growing terror creeping into her voice.

“I would like you to imagine a hypothetical scenario,” Pearl began, her voice monotone. “Think of what would have happened if instead of Amethyst arriving first and rescuing you from the corrupted Gem, my Diamond had managed to outpace her.”

Connie’s eye twitched, and she barely managed to refrain from yelling. “That’s what’s been driving me crazy all day! Steven would be dead because of me!”

Pearl nodded. “I am glad that you understand my dilemma, then. Put simply, the longer you stay in the vicinity of Beach City, the more likely it is your presence will draw the attention of an attacker, and thusly more likely that my Diamond will attempt to sacrifice himself to save you. This is unacceptable.”

Connie nodded. “All of that makes sense. But what am I supposed to do about it?”

“You have two options. I will either ensure that you never come into contact with Beach City or my Diamond ever again, or you will improve yourself so that you are not guaranteed to perish if faced with a corrupted Gem on your own, thereby eliminating my Diamond’s desire to protect you.”

Silence hung in the air. Connie began to giggle softly, barely restraining her laughter. “Really? Really? I’m just a human! What can I do other than be, I dunno, a meat shield for you to strap to Steven’s arm?”

Pearl stood stock still for a moment, then sat down. “Five thousand, two-hundred thirty-seven years ago, a lone Pearl stared down a squad of a dozen warrior gems. There is something you must understand about us Pearls: we were never built for fighting. It was taught to us that we were guaranteed to be shattered if we ever set foot on a battlefield. We should stick to our duties, like every other Gem in the universe. Physically, we are the weakest type of Gem. But this Pearl was a rebel. Through some twisted logic that is unfathomable to me to do this day, she thought she was equal to all of the rest of gemkind. So this Pearl, with no backup and a cracked gem, charged straight into the Quartz squad. And… and she won. Somehow. If one of us can do something completely impossible, I have no doubt humans are capable of similar feats.”

Understanding dawned on Connie’s face. “No way! You were a-”

Pearl looked scandalized. “What? Goodness no. I mean Rose’s Pearl. The white one.”

“Oh,” For a moment, Connie imagined life without Steven. Wake up. Go to school. Tennis. Homework. Violin. Books. Sleep. Repeat. Then she imagined life with Steven, not as a pitiful drag-along, but an actual partner, leaping up to save him from all comers, silver sword in hand gleaming in the sunlight as she struck down beast after beast…

Of course, more likely, she’d become a meat pancake. Then again, meat pancake was a better option
than the abacus in her mind. “I’ll…”

“Decide with haste.”

“...I’ll stay.”

OxOxO

Pearl sat on top of a waterfall and thought about nothing, sword cradled in her lap. She didn’t think about all of the friends that she lost. She didn’t think about Rose’s warm embrace, her comforting words, her commanding presence. She didn’t think about Rainbow Quartz, and their hushed, half-serious discussions of going the way of Garnet. She didn’t think about those endless nights after the war she spent silently crying alongside Rose. She didn’t think about Rose’s smile. At all. She didn’t think about her harsh, thorny words, digging into her gem with their truth.

Pearl spent most days like this, thinking about none of that on top of her waterfall. Sometimes, Garnet would come in, and try to talk to Pearl. She didn’t listen. Amethyst wandered into her room occasionally, doing her best to cheer her up while not really understanding the problem. Pearl didn’t notice her, either, because she wasn’t Rose.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Pearl knew that she was only proving Rose’s point. That without someone to guide her, she was just some empty, useless husk, unfit for anything but sobbing and not thinking about anything in her room. But Pearl preferred not thinking about that, the same way that she didn’t think about Rose, and the same way that she didn’t think about anything when a corrupted gem popped up and she had to pretend everything was perfectly fine for a little while.

It took all of her energy, all of her effort, to do that. To prove to Rose that she was(n’t) independent, that she could(n’t) function with(out) her. Even though she knew it was pointless, that Garnet talked with Rose about Pearl’s “progress” - or rather lack thereof - when she thought that Pearl couldn’t hear.

Pearl gripped the edges of her waterfall, trying her best to hold in her tears. Then, something miraculous happened. Rose knocked on her door. Of course it could’ve been anybody, but only Rose bothered to knock like any being with a shred of politeness. Pearl sprung to her feet and willed the door to iris open, to find-

That human girl from earlier, the one that Steven was so attached to. From what little Pearl recalled about human biology, she seemed quite tired: there were dark circles under her eyes, and she almost seemed hunched over. Pearl reached out for a name, failed to find one, and so just settled for staring at the girl, dumbfounded.

The girl cleared her throat, her voice cracking as she said, “Hello, miss. Um, I… I need to talk to you.”

Pearl finally found her voice again. “How- but- how did you-” she stuttered, taking a step back into her sanctuary.

The girl shifted from foot to foot, staring fixedly at the floor of the Temple’s antechamber. “Steven told me that you guys all had private rooms inside here, and that space was a little bit weird and that this door led to everywhere inside the Temple so I figured that knocking on the gemstone that looked a little bit like yours would be like knocking on your door. Ma’am,” she said, almost too fast for Pearl to process.

Pearl shook her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. “But why? I mean… just…” She sighed, and
made a vague shooing gesture with her hand. “Whatever your reasons, I am not taking any… visitors right now. And anyways, this beach is forbidden to humans. Honestly, sometimes I doubt Rose’s assertions that most of the population is literate with the way you ignore the signs. Just… leave me be.” She glared down at the tiny human with all the ferocity she could muster, which, considering the circumstances, wasn’t much.

Apparently, it was enough. The human flinched and stumbled back, saying, “I, ma’am, I just…” She stared at her feet again.

Pearl rolled her eyes and turned around to retreat back into the Temple when the girl blurted, “I can’t leave Steven!”

That gave Pearl pause. “What?” she asked over her shoulder, facing the child once more.

The girl clenched her fists and looked Pearl in the eye with surprising intensity. “I nearly… I nearly died today because I couldn’t do anything. I’m only here because I got lucky, and Amethyst got poofed for saving me. And… I… what if that had been Steven? He’s a human, he’d die if he got hurt bad enough to poof, and he’d throw his life away for me without even thinking about it if it came down to it. I can’t stay here knowing that if I get in trouble there’s a chance Steven might get stabbed or clubbed to death or hit with a poison effect or—”

Pearl blinked. “What?”

Blushing, the girl continued, “Oh, um, it’s just, uh… Anyways, I… I need to learn how to fight for myself so that I don’t have to worry about him getting hurt because of me. I need to protect him. The… the Earth is my home too! I want to, no, I need to protect it! And…” Connie hesitated, blushing. “I’ve always, um, wanted to learn how to use a sword. So, ma’am, could you… teach me?”

Pearl balked, her mind traveling thousands of years ago, to the first time she saw Rose’s smile, the first time she held a blade in her hands, the first time she felt Rose’s hands around her own. Stance wide, body lowered. Keep your balance, and… thrust.

Her eyes watered, and Pearl fought down tears. It was ridiculous, of course. There were a thousand ways a human could die on the battlefield. A thousand ways a human could be cut down without a thought by the beasts they built their oldest legends around. Then again, there were a thousand ways a Pearl could get shattered in a fight, a thousand ways one could die when facing their “betters.”

Pearl scrutinized every inch of the girl. She wasn’t exactly bristling with muscle, but then again, neither was Pearl. And that wasn’t the important part, strength and speed could be cultivated. What was important was that fire in her eyes, that passion, that iron. Besides… taking on an apprentice might help her… not think about things.

“Very well,” The human slumped, breathing a sigh of relief. “I must warn you, however. This will not be pleasant. This will not be ‘fun.’ This will be grueling, painful, and will break you apart piece by bloody piece until you become a master. Do you understand me?” Connie flinched. “Do you understand me?” Pearl repeated, adding an edge to her voice.

The girl nodded, gulping. “Y-Yes, ma’am.”

Pearl inclined her head. “Good. Get some rest, you will need it. I will see you the next time you come to Beach City.” She started to walk back to her room, then paused. “Oh. One more thing.”

“Yes, ma’am?”
Pearl’s gravity faltered for a moment. She blushed turquoise. “Er… What’s your name?”

Chapter End Notes

Wooooo, part two when, amirite?
Be His Knight (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Crystal Gem Pearl gets a babysitting job.

It was a simple plan. The less moving parts, the less opportunities there were for things to go wrong. Step one was for Pearl to obtain a vehicle lawfully, or as lawfully as she could without a driver’s license or much modern currency. This left her with two options: venture to a scrapyard and hope she could construct some kind of monstrosity out of what she could find there, or delve into Amethyst’s room where Pearl knew that there was a hoard of motorcycles from when her compatriot had developed an obsession with them after watching that overwrought musical. Of course, Amethyst’s interest only lasted a few months, but the damage had been done to Beach City’s biker population, and tales of the legendary Beach City Bike Eater persist, deterring most hellions from the town.

Pearl ultimately decided to go with the familiar evil, and regretted her choice almost immediately.

Amethyst weaved through the massive piles of garbage and splashed through grime-filled puddles, Pearl stumbling after her. The white Gem tripped over a stack of tin cans, and with a tremble, the mound of moldering comics written in Japanese kanji it was supporting collapsed, falling in an avalanche.

Beneath the pile of cheesy shonen, something about a Bizarre Adventure, Pearl’s eye twitched with incandescent rage. If it weren’t for the fact that her pupil lived a dozen miles away from any Warp Pads, and unlike in ancient times Connie couldn’t simply explain that she was going to a crumbling temple miles away to train with the being that was the root of many of the war goddess myths that pervaded human religion and have her parents be honored, not horrified, Pearl would’ve given up and asked Connie to make the walk to Beach City herself.

"Yeesh, P," Amethyst said, her voice difficult to hear from beneath hundreds of juvenile distractions, "Be careful, why dontcha? I put a lotta effort into getting that stuff. It was almost ready for my burning party!” Pearl could hear Amethyst pushing aside more of the books before plunging her hand into the pile, pulling Pearl out.

Pearl harrumphed, but made no further comment. That was the fourth of a similar string of incidents, and she was having a hard time keeping her wrath in check as they further descended into Amethyst’s collection of filth. Alas, despite every instinct screaming at her to discipline Amethyst for letting her room get so out of hand, the need for transportation outweighed Pearl’s desire to vent.

“Come on, Pearl! What do we saaaaay?” Amethyst asked, all smiles and sweetness.

“Thank you. Amethyst,” Pearl growled through gritted teeth. “Let’s get a move on, shall we?”

The two continued their journey through the vast cavern, winding through mazes of junk, passing by serene collections of odd memorabilia, and clambering over dunes of scrap before they finally reached their destination: a collection of mangled motorbikes unceremoniously tossed together in a small clearing. Pearl sighed in relief, and would’ve slumped against a nearby wall if it wasn’t made of structurally unsound interlocking toy bricks of a variety of colors and shapes.
“Welp, we’re here,” Amethyst said, flopping down into a shallow puddle of slime. Pearl winced. “Sooo, whaddya need this stuff for?”

Pearl began retrieving her tools from her gem, mouth a thin line as she examined the sorry lot of materials she had to work with. “I’ve taken on a human apprentice, and I need a way to get to and from her dwelling in order to train her.”

Amethyst retained her relaxed posture, but her eyes hardened. “Pearl…” she warned.

“What?” The other Gem knelt down to inspect one of the more intact specimens. Its engine could be repaired to functionality at the very least, although Pearl couldn’t say the same for the rest of the vehicle.

“Look, I don’t wanna have to deal with even more of your sad-sackiness.”

“Amethyst!” Pearl screeched, scandalized.

“I dunno why, but you’ve been really, really flipping useless lately. What you don’t need right now is another human you’ve turned into a brainwashed, sword-fighting meathead kickin’ the bucket. I picked up the pieces when Atalanta bit it, I am not gonna do that again.”

Pearl scoffed. “Oh, please. Not all of them die- er- were killed! Theseus survived! And a few others, I’m sure, their names just… escape me at the moment.”

“Yeah, that dingnozzle managed to pop a few Corrupted Gems. Bravo. That’s only ’cuz you tore out the Temple’s power crystal and strapped a buncha tech junk onto him. Nobody could get back in for a hundred years after that! And you cried in that little hut we made for at least six months after he turned into a wrinkly old man and didn’t wake up one morning.”

“I-”

“Oh, oh! I wasn’t around for this,” Amethyst continued, “but remember Gilgamesh? I still sometimes find ya looking all mopey in that museum where that story you wrote about him is, because you couldn’t handle the guilt when he went bonkers and you had to-”

“This one’s different!” Pearl cried. “This one… this one is different. She’s like me, Amethyst.”

Amethyst narrowed her eyes. “Yeah, well, I sure hope so. Because you’re not gonna have any either of my shoulders to cry on this time. You’re the one that’s killing ‘em, when you push all your weird damage onto them.” The quartz winced. She’d gone too far again, and Pearl obviously wasn’t in the best state of mind, she was such an idiot and-

The other Gem shouted, “Oh, stop pretending you’re so above it all! Don’t think I haven’t noticed the little shrines you’ve built here to humans that you’ve abandoned when they started getting old because they weren’t any fun to for you to play with anymore! I’m sure something dedicated to that… onion woman will be here too, sooner or later!!”

Amethyst stepped back, shocked, then abandoned Pearl, dashing through her stacks of memories. Both of the Gems’ tears mixed with the water dripping down from the distant ceiling. “It’ll be different this time,” Pearl assured herself as shaking hands went about slowly cobbling together a motorcycle. She certainly didn’t think about each apprentice that died, or how she took each of them on every time that Rose abandoned her, or how painful it was to watch them shrivel.

“It’ll be different.”
“Yeah, I guess we hafta wait and see!” Amethyst roared from somewhere within the junk maze.

OxOxO

The second step was decidedly simpler, primarily due to a series of incredibly (un)fortunate events that happened to work in Connie’s favor. A day after Connie got back from the Palanquin, ruminating upon the conundrum of how to balance Pearl’s stringent training regimen with her mother’s strict schedule, one Dr. Wernstrom fell ill from clam poisoning. Three days after that, his backup, Dr. Gero, was run over by either an extraordinarily fast-moving orange truck, or a hulking monster with a wild white mane, depending on who told the tale.

And so, the task of picking up the two doctors’ shifts fell to one extraordinarily frustrated Priyanka Maheswaran. Not only did her new schedule only allow for the barest of interaction with Connie in the morning, Doug was preoccupied with a six-month contract guarding some ridiculous cheese factory that ate up his entire afternoon and evening. Priyanka was generally fine with leaving her daughter alone for a few hours - she was a responsible girl, after all - but abandoning her until Doug got back at nine at night was ludicrous.

This, of course, could’ve been easily rectified if Priyanka hadn’t sent all the babysitters and nannies in the area packing at the slightest infraction against her immaculate, ten page-long packet that detailed all of the things Connie could do, when she could do them, and the things she could definitely not do and their abacus values. Pity the poor bored teenager who threw the packet in the recycling or, stars above, the trash, when faced with an overprotective mother already cranky from an eight-hour shift.

Connie could not have imagined a more perfect situation. Or, perhaps as Steven would put it, Pearlfect.

When the day of the schedule changes arrived on Saturday, the girl in question walked down the stairs from her room to find her mother pacing back and forth, phone in a vice grip. Connie was amazed that the screen hadn’t cracked. “No! I will pay you twenty dollars an hour if you- argh!” Connie winced, then prepared her carefully-practiced spiel.

“Hey, mom,” Connie yawned, walking towards the table where a vibrantly colored veggie-and-fruit smoothie infused with protein powder laid. Priyanka had spent hours perfecting the formula, precisely calibrating its nutritional value to Connie’s age, height, weight, and level of activity.

Priyanka, trying her best to put on her doting-mother face despite her frustration, turned towards her daughter. “Hello, dear. Did you sleep well?” Connie nodded, and Priyanka ticked that off her welfare checklist. “Any aches or pains?” Connie shook her head, sliding into her seat and beginning to down her smoothie. “Did you see any acne in the mirror when you got up?” Another shake of the head. “Alright dear, just let me check your temperature and we can get on with our morning.” Priyanka opened one of the kitchen’s drawers and retrieved the ear thermometer, meticulously washing it before popping a plastic covering on its tip and gently pushing it into Connie’s ear. 98.4 degrees Fahrenheit. Slightly hotter than average, but still within the standard range of variation.

“So, um,” Connie began, filling up her mug with the second serving of shake, “I’ve noticed that you’ve been a bit… stressed, lately, about the shift change and stuff,” Her eyes darted towards the garage door, where she had found another punching bag beaten to the point of uselessness. “I asked my friend about it, and h- uh- she said that her older sister would be willing to look after me while you get everything sorted out. For free, even!”

Priyanka’s heart started beating a tad less quickly. “Really?” She paused for a moment, debating the merits of letting a total stranger look after her daughter. In the end, despite the multitude of unknown
variables that such a person would introduce, the pro of having somebody take care of Connie while she and Doug were gone outweighed all the cons. “Call your friend and tell her to get her sister over here. I need to show her the rules.”

OxOxO

Step twenty-seven, pivot to the left and block a parry from second opponent. Fighting back a yawn, Steven spun to the left, avoiding a downward slash from the first Holo-Pearl, and raised his khopesh to turn aside the thrust of the second. The white Pearl had awoken him at five in the morning for an “emergency assessment,” whatever that meant, and he was fairly certain his fatigue was part of the challenge that she had in mind. Steps twenty-eight through twenty-nine, perform a two-handed cleave, incapacitating your first opponent, and use the backswing to- Steven’s train of thought was interrupted by an unexpected flurry of strikes from the first light construct, and he scampered backwards barely in time to avoid its steel blitz. Teetering, Steven attempted to ground himself while he clumsily blocked the whirlwind that was the Holo-Pearl’s blade, but while he was distracted the second one followed up with a lightning quick roundhouse that impacted Steven’s gut with tremendous force. He rocketed across the arena, crashing into the bleachers. The Renegade arched an eyebrow a few feet away from where the boy laid, stunned.

The blue Pearl resisted the urge to help her charge as Steven struggled to his feet. The first Holo-Pearl leapt towards him while the second dashed across the Sky Arena, leaving behind a trail of disturbed dust. Hands shaking around the hilt of his khopesh, Steven parried the first Holo-Pearl’s aerial assault, but with a harsh clang the blade fell from his loose grip and clattered to the ground. Steven’s eyes widened, and he froze for just a moment, leaving him defenseless to the second one’s unseen strike.

The Holo-Pearl stopped just short of slicing Steven’s skull wide open. “LEVEL THREE FAILED. CHALLENGER DEFEATED!” it crowed. Steven collapsed onto the Sky Arena’s crumbling bleachers, his breath ragged. “DO YOU WISH TO DO BATTLE AGAIN?”

“No… thanks, but I appreciate the offer,” Steven panted.

Sighing, the white Pearl rose from her seat in the bleachers and strode towards Steven. “For the majority of that sparring match, you performed above average, if not exceptionally, in fending off the Holo-Pearls. Your technique was excellent, and you easily fell into the rhythm of the battle,” The boy beamed. “Then it all fell apart, and I believe we both know why,” She stared down at Steven imperiously. He groaned internally, having almost memorized the lecture the white Pearl was about to give him at this point.

“All martial art is composed of a series of basic techniques. Holo-Pearl Two, perform training routine Callout Techniques Two,” Pearl began, hands clasped behind her back.

She stepped to the side, and a Holo-Pearl smoothly took her place and began demonstrating. “PARRY! DODGE! THRUST! PARRY! SLICE!” it droned, performing the moves rotely.

Pearl continued. “Of course, each of these has a number of different permutations, each designed to perform different functions. For example: Holo-Pearl Two, perform Sabre Parrying Demonstration One.”

“PRIME! SECONDE! TIERCE! QUARTE! QUINTE! SIXTE! SEPTIME!” The construct rapidly cycled through a variety of parries, each superficially similar but differing in their exact purpose.

“However, it does not matter if you have mastered every individual technique if do not know how they connect with one another. That is what the forms I teach you are supposed to introduce: by
presenting hypothetical battle scenarios with all of the steps already planned out for you, you are able to put all of your knowledge into practice and begin to adapt to the flow of swordplay so that you are able to hold your own in an unpredictable combat scenario,” Pearl pinched the bridge of her nose. “That appears to be where you’re stuck. You’re leaning on what you know works too much, so when an opponent does something unexpected, you freeze up and are unable to defend yourself effectively. And if a sudden break from a simple form while training is able to throw you off guard, you’ll get eaten alive in the thick of battle when your enemies don’t adhere to the drills that you’ve been practicing and instead come at you with everything they’ve got. To put it simply, you cannot adapt.”

Steven shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I know! It’s just-”

Pearl cut him off. “No more excuses. Starting next session, the Holo-Pearls will be programmed to fight like real soldiers, and will not hesitate to exploit your reliance on routine.”

The other Pearl flinched. “St- my Diamond isn’t ready!” she insisted, rising to her feet.

The renegade shot her a cool glance. “And he will never be unless we push him. If he stagnates like this, Steven won’t last a second on a real battlefield.”

“I’m right here, y’know!” Steven’s cheeks were red with shame.

“He has oth-” The blue Pearl was interrupted by her gem beginning to vibrate loudly. An awkward silence hung in the air as she pulled Steven’s cell phone from out from her gem and descended the stairs, handing the device to its owner.

Steven tapped the answer button and lifted the phone to his ear. “Hey Connie! Um, sorry, but this isn’t really a great- wait, what? Which one?” A brief pause. “Okay, just- is it really that urgent?” Another pause. “I guess, I’m just wondering how- fine,” Clearing his throat, Steven handed the cell phone to the Pearl in front of him. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” Pearl hesitantly took the offered device. “Hello? Yes, this is Pearl speaking. Now? How did you even know that- oh, of course, I suppose that makes sense. I don’t even have the proper attire ready yet!” She sighed at Connie’s response. “Yes, I suppose that is an option. At least I have a helmet. I will be there momentarily,” Handing the phone back to Steven, Pearl said, “We will speak about this later. I have somewhere I need to be, apparently.”

OxOxO

Riding a motorcycle was simultaneously one of the most terrifying and exhilarating things that Pearl had ever experienced. When the chopper Pearl had rebuilt from the ground up began rumbling and shot forward at terrifying speeds, Pearl’s mind numbed itself to any kind of conscious thought in favor of internal screaming. Thankfully, her reflexes took over before she crashed, and soon the Gem adapted to the howling winds and incredible speeds.

She was almost disappointed when she ground to a stop a block away from the house, as per Connie’s instructions. Disembarking with shaking legs, Pearl tore her helmet off took a deep breath of fresh air, absorbing the sights, sounds, and smells of suburbia.

The walk down to the Maheswarans’ residence was almost a surrealistically perfect picture of the platonic ideal of a middle-class human neighborhood. Each three-story condo melded seamlessly into the next, their only distinction being the hues of their paint jobs. Pearl had to backtrack twice, Connie’s house blending perfectly with all the other condominiums.
When she finally found the Maheswaran residence, Pearl shifted her clothing to become something less “warrior ballerina,” as Connie had put it. Her ribbon disappeared into her blue tunic, which became a simple star-emblazoned tee, and her yellow leggings warped into corduroy shorts. Bracing herself for what Connie had described the “smother to end all smothers” (it had taken a few minutes after that for Connie to explain the colloquialism to Pearl), Pearl rapped on the door thrice, and reviewed the carefully chosen set of lies that Connie had constructed for her, muttering a surprisingly believable monologue about her fictional career as a barista under her breath.

Just as Pearl had finished rehearsing, Priyanka Maheswaran threw the door open and looked the Gem up and down. Seeing nothing that immediately disqualified Pearl from taking temporary guardianship over Connie, Priyanka forced her mouth into a smile and said, “You must be Pearl. Come in. We have a lot to discuss.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you,” Pearl murmured, put on her own wavering grin, and followed Priyanka inside. The walls were painted a painfully inoffensive beige, a bookshelf was tastefully placed above an uncomfortable-looking couch with a floral pattern, and potted plants were everywhere that Pearl looked. It was all so... Human.

Priyanka hustled Pearl to the kitchen table, where Connie was perfectly playing the part of the innocent, diligent daughter. “Please, sit,” Priyanka insisted, and Pearl, with only some misgivings, acquiesced.

“Tea?” Priyanka said, and Pearl resisted the urge to shudder with revulsion.

“I'll pass, thanks,” the Gem replied said with a weak smile.

“Very well. Let’s get down to business, then,” Priyanka slid a folder across the table to the bewildered Pearl, saying, “Connie is a very special girl with very special needs. You come highly recommended, so I trust you can tend to them.”

As Priyanka summarized the contents of the packet - a rather obsessively detailed schedule, Connie’s diet, and the policy on television and other digital distractions - Pearl paged through it, digesting the information quickly. If she was to come back, then she would need to adhere to Priyanka’s rules. Unfortunately, Priyanka’s instructions made it rather difficult to properly train Connie.

The violin practice would take an hour. That was unavoidable, Priyanka had Connie record her sessions so that she would have proof of her daughter’s progress. Faking them would end up taking more time than letting Connie study the instrument. Besides, the girl would need the break. The days that she had tennis lessons would be somewhat tricky, since that took two hours, but at least it was some form of athletic activity. Pearl could help Connie through her homework in half an hour at the very most. And then, of course, there were all the rules that Pearl couldn’t help but break. At least it was nothing that some careful cover-ups and lachrymal essence couldn’t fix.

However, Pearl noticed a few inconsistencies. “Taking your calculations into account, you’re off by about half a serving of how many carrots I should give her every meal,” Connie’s eyes widened in horror. “You’re also far too conservative with the protein. As I assume she’ll go into puberty soon, Connie should have at least 20% more meat or meat alternatives in her diet.”

After the initial shock had passed, Priyanka gave a genuine smile and outstretched her hand. “I think we’ll get along just fine, Pearl,” Connie could only watch in growing dread.

OxOxO

For perhaps the first time ever, Connie found herself eager for the schoolday to end. As the pre-
algebra teacher droned on, the minutes on the digital clock ticking forward agonizingly slowly, Connie’s mind was somewhere else completely. Every training montage she had ever read or watched was running through her mind simultaneously in a blur of overused tropes.

The bell rung, and Connie leapt out of her seat, slinging her backpack over her shoulder and snatchng her homework from the teacher’s desk as she sprinted out the door. She ran past the hundreds of students filtering into the hallway, rounding corners at a rather unsafe pace until she reached the front lobby. Connie flung the doors open and stumbled outside, panting.

Just as Connie had recovered from her mad dash, Pearl’s arrival was heralded by the low growl of a classic Davey Harrison chopper. Connie couldn’t help but snicker at the incongruity of such a beastly motorcycle coming into the lot at a perfectly lawful pace, perhaps even going slightly slower than the horde of mom-vans gently rolling towards their waiting children. It was like watching a wolf graze alongside a herd of sheep.

Pearl rolled to a stop alongside Connie, clad in a leather jacket and pitch-black helmet. Kicking the stand down, she got off the bike and tossed the jacket to Connie before digging around in the small storage compartment beneath the primary seat. Connie zipped up the jacket, which fit surprisingly well, and Pearl handed her another helmet, of the same shade and make as her own.

Pulling the helm over her head, Connie clambered onto the bike’s “backseat” and clung tightly to Pearl, drinking in the astonished gazes of her classmates before the Gem took off. The ride, despite Pearl’s agonizingly legal speed, seemed to be over in a few minutes. Of course, that was probably because Connie was nearly blind with terror the entire time. With a soft putter, the chopper slowed to a stop at the front door of the Maheswaran residence. Every part of her trembling, Connie fell off the bike. Pearl helped her to her feet, and both took off their gear in silence.

“So, ma’am,” Connie said as she opened the door with the spare key, hidden in a rather cleverly disguised fake rock, “What are we going to do first?”

“We are going to do your homework.”

That was not at all what Connie expected. “Oh. Al...right, then,” As soon as Pearl stepped inside the threshold of the house, she dropped the illusion of human clothing with a sigh of relief, returning to her normal tutu. “Um, how exactly is doing math worksheets going to help me with my training?”

“Well, if we don’t do your homework, I won’t be able to act as your ‘babysitter,’ anymore,” Pearl explained, making her way to the kitchen table. “So I won’t be able to really teach you anything if we don’t get your chores done. This isn’t exactly what I was envisioning either, but we might as well get it over with now.”

“I guess you have a point,” Connie said, sighed, then opened up her overstuffed backpack, wrenching out a few note-laden binders,. She strained under their weight as she lurched over to the table. “We should take care of the chapter analysis first, that’s usually the most time consuming…”

OxOxO

“...and done,” Connie blinked, astonished. It had taken less than twenty minutes to accomplish what was normally at least an hour’s worth of work with Pearl’s aid. Considering that Connie still did most of the mental labor, she didn’t even feel like she’d cheated. “So, what now?”

Pearl smiled, something dangerous in her expression. “Now we begin. Come with me,” She slid out of her chair and went out the front door, striding out onto the sidewalk. Connie, befuddled, followed.
“I’ve taken the liberty of measuring the length of each side of the block,” Pearl began, “and each came to a clean 125 meters, for a total of 500 meters around. It’s perfect for our purposes. To start, we are going to run ten laps around the block.”

Connie’s knees wobbled. “What did you say, ma’am? I’m not exactly the most, um, physically active person, and I—”

The Gem scoffed. “Do you want to practice your excuses or learn swordplay? I’m only here to help you with one of those.”

The girl gulped. “O-okay then, ma’am. Let’s get started,” Taking a deep breath, Connie began jogging down the sidewalk, Pearl keeping perfect pace with her.

“Faster,” Pearl ordered. Connie gritted her teeth and forced her legs to pick up the pace, her muscles beginning to burn. “Faster!” Connie reluctantly acquiesced.

Halfway through the first lap, Connie was feeling winded. By the second, she was dead on her feet. “I… I don’t think I can keep this up, ma’am,” she panted, still doing her best to run but slowing down regardless.

“Precisely! You don’t think you can! Prove yourself wrong!” Pearl retorted. “I have seen humans lift cars, pull trains, and break stone blocks when they put their minds to it! What you think you can do and what you actually can do are entirely separate!”

Growling, Connie couldn’t think of a good argument, and so she, despite her body’s screeching protestations, continued pounding down the sidewalk.

In the end, Connie finished. Barely. Vision blurring, acid coursing through her veins, and heart fluttering, Connie collapsed on her house’s driveway. She was vaguely aware of Pearl helping her up and gently guiding her inside before sitting her down on the couch.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Connie’s faculties returned. Every part of her body burned or ached in some manner. Groaning, she clutched her throbbing head, the thought crossing her mind that perhaps training with an ancient soldier who was used to working with beings that didn’t have the physical limitations of a human eleven year-old wasn’t the best idea.

But then again, magic, monsters, and a good possibility of being hospitalized from overtraining was a better option than being bereft of Steven and going back to having her spirit slowly wither away under her mother’s oppressive reign and from the harsh realities of being a nerdy girl in a public school.

Steeling herself, Connie wobbled to her feet and limped to the kitchen, to find Pearl chopping up a variety of greens with dazzling efficiency. “Hello, Connie. There’s some dumbbells on the table, could you do some curls with them while I prepare your ‘smoothie?’” The girl in question glanced to at the massive, leaden weights making slight indentations in the table. They were marked as weighing twenty pounds.

Connie groaned.

OxOxO

There wasn’t an inch of Connie’s body that wasn’t screaming with pain. After a hundred curls, there was a hundred pushups, then a hundred sit ups, then a hundred squats… it never seemed to end. And now there were the knives.

Connie, with every ounce of her willpower, threw herself to the side as another pair of wooden...
training blades sped towards her, then fell to the ground. She’d been dodging these projectiles in the backyard for ten minutes now, and she was fairly certain that her body would give up before Pearl did. Well, perhaps more accurately she was getting repeatedly hit by wooden projectiles, and occasionally getting lucky.

She gathered all of her remaining strength, and pushed herself to her feet… only to find that her arms wouldn’t respond. Neither would her legs. Both of them were numb with agony. “Um… Pearl?” she whispered, voice hoarse. “I… can’t get up.”

The white Gem immediately stowed the knives she was preparing to throw and ran to Connie’s side. Retrieving a vial of pink liquid, she turned the whimpering child over, and gently poured the tears down Connie’s throat. “You did very well today, Connie. Far better than I expected. I honestly figured that your body would’ve broken down at least an hour ago. You have extraordinary willpower,” On the edges of Connie’s perception, the pain began to fade.

However, a different fire was lit inside of Connie’s soul. “You… you wanted to nearly kill me?” she spluttered.

“Oh, don’t be dramatic. You’d just be hospitalized for a few weeks if you went this overboard normally. There, that should be enough.” Pearl stepped back and capped the vial of Rose’s tears, watching Connie.

Miraculously, in a few more moments, the electric torment and exhaustion completely disappeared. If anything, Connie felt… better than before. She leapt to her feet with ease, and looked at her mentor in wonder.

Sensing Connie’s silent question, Pearl explained, “The way human body builds muscle is incredibly inefficient. Only by fibers tearing does the muscle grow stronger, as the new material regrows tougher and more elastic than the original. That’s why good training hurts. Of course, overdoing it leads to the complete incapacitation of the system, creating a long period of recovery where all that hard work atrophies, often leaving you even worse off than before. But with Rose’s tears, we can bypass the entire process of long-term healing, allowing you to immediately gain the benefits of destroying most of your muscle fibers and bypass the recovery time.”

Connie took a moment to absorb what Pearl was saying, and rapidly came to a simultaneously terrifying and thrilling conclusion. “So, we’re just going to keep doing this again and again and again until I get good enough to not break a sweat for these activities, then move on to even harder training. And I’m not getting any breaks because that weird potion also gives me the equivalent of a week in the hospital.”

Pearl nodded. “Exactly. But before we do another cycle,” she stopped dramatically, “I have to record your practicing your violin for one hour to satisfy your mother. Think of it as a break.”

Connie had conflicting feelings. On one hand, she was stopping her training to do a simple, mundane activity. On the other hand, she was stopping her training to do a simple, mundane activity. She decided to feel glad for the respite.
Be His Knight (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

Connie and Pearl surprise Steven.

Chapter Notes

We did two updates today! If you clicked to go to the last chapter, go back one for part 1.

Five hours every day. Five hours of pain, sweat, blood, and occasionally tears. Five hours of breaking her body down, pushing it to the limits, then reforging it to begin the cycle anew. And like Pearl promised, it didn’t get any easier. Every time Connie felt her burden ease just the tiniest bit, Pearl adjusted the routine accordingly. So five kilometers became ten, then fifteen. Twenty pounds became twenty-five, then thirty, then forty. It never ended. At least Rose’s tears got rid of Connie’s need for glasses, and her mother and father were generally too tired in the morning to notice that their daughter’s frames lacked lenses.

But Pearl wasn’t a cruel taskmaster. Well, she was, but that wasn’t all she was. Pearl was kind, witty, caring, nervous. And surprisingly human, sometimes. During tennis practice, Connie would occasionally catch Pearl silently cheering her on out of the corner of her eye. She would console Connie if she had a bad day at school (even if Pearl was obviously incredibly uncomfortable), and, more than that, she knew Connie’s limits.

Pearl pushed them, she pushed them hard, but the Gem knew the moment Connie couldn’t go on. Technically, with enough of Rose’s tears, Connie could keep training forever, but Pearl had a keen eye for Connie’s mental fatigue. Pain lingered in the mind, if not the body. So when Connie felt like she was going to break into a million pieces no matter how many tears she gulped down, Pearl would take Connie inside, put a meal in the microwave, and they’d just… exist for a while, and talk. Connie would sit enraptured by Pearl’s fantastic tales of the heroic Rebellion, accompanied by grandiose memories projected by her gemstone. And Connie would show Pearl the private pieces of her life, the things that her mother couldn’t touch or control, things that her mentor would find interesting or worthwhile, things that would prove that she wasn’t like any other human. Connie’s leatherbound, signed copy of The Complete Spirit Morph Saga Omnibus, complete with the alternate ending released by the author that was at least a good replacement for the terrible wedding scene (although Connie personally felt that they bungled up the original themes of the series and went overboard on the angst to compensate for the sickeningly sweet canon ending). Her computer, filled with stellar empires and earthly queendoms, all carefully guided to supremacy by Connie’s strategic brilliance. And the occasional automation mod, tech flowchart, and walkthrough.

It was almost like having another friend.

OxOxO

Connie slumped in her chair. “Alright. This should be the final draft. Opinions?”
Pearl scanned the document open on Connie’s computer. “It’s like I told you the last three times, it’s perfectly fine. You just need to stop obsessively editing it.”

The girl groaned. “But it’s such a huge grade! It has to be perfect! Plus the story is going to be read publicly and—“

The Gem clapped a hand on Connie’s shoulder. “What else are you going to do with this? Add another dozen pages to your worldbuilding document? Archon is as good as it’s going to get. And you’re only going to have time to read the prologue out loud, for goodness’ sake! It’s time for us to start your training, anyways.”

Connie immediately perked up. “How many kilometers am I running today, ma’am?”

“Five.”

“What? Last time we—”

“We’re moving forward in your training. You’ve reached peak physical fitness for someone of your age, and besides, any more muscle mass will start slowing you down. The day one routine is a good warm-up before—”

Excitement glimmered in Connie’s eyes. “Swords?”

Pearl smirked. “Yes. Swords.”

Connie sprinted out the front door and all the way around the block ten times, a manic grin on her face. After finishing her laps in just under thirteen minutes, followed by her curls, situps, pushups, and squats, she reported for duty in the backyard. She had barely broken a sweat.

Pearl was waiting for her, a wooden bokken practice blade in each hand. Silently, she tossed one to Connie.

“We are going to be going straight into the deep end today to assess your current level of skill and how I should approach training you,” Pearl said. The Gem closed her eyes, and her gemstone began shining. In an instant, a holographic clone of Connie’s mentor sprang into existence, eyes glowing a gentle blue. Handing the bokken to the light construct, Pearl ordered, “Holo-Pearl, begin Advanced Combat Training Module Four.”

“Wait, what—”

The Holo-Pearl’s eyes flashed and blazed a fierce red. With a cry of, “ADVANCED COMBAT TRAINING MODULE FOUR INITIATED! PREPARE TO FIGHT, CHALLENGER!” it charged at Connie.

Connie barely raised her blade in time to block, stumbling back from the force that the light construct put into its blow. Gritting her teeth, she widened her stance and tightened her grip on the bokken, reflexes honed by weeks of dodging wooden knives kicking in as Connie gracelessly parried the Holo-Pearl’s attacks.

The Holo-Pearl continued its dance of blades, forcing Connie towards the fence. Just before she would’ve been pushed into a corner, Connie swung her right leg up, kicking the construct in the chest with strength honed from the equivalent of ten months of intensive physical training.

As it reeled from the blow, Connie scrambled to the side before starting her own frenzied offense, more akin to a thug swinging a bat than any style of swordplay. Pearl winced. It was almost
physically painful for her to watch.  

After a few moments of adjusting to its foe’s odd tactics, the Holo-Pearl began batting aside Connie’s wild strikes with ease and started a graceful counteroffensive, its bokken a blur in the air. The blade snuck past Connie’s defenses, leaving bruises all over her upper body, but the girl forced herself to move past the pain. Connie popped her knee up for another kick, but as soon as she raised her foot the Holo-Pearl struck her with a powerful two-handed slash, forcing Connie to the ground. Before she had an opportunity to react, the Holo-Pearl had leveled the point of its blade at Connie’s throat. “CHALLENGER DEFEATED!” it screeched, somehow managing to sound smug. “DO YOU WISH-”

Connie swept her leg out, knocking the Holo-Pearl off balance. As soon as it faltered, Connie leapt forward and tackled it to the ground, repeatedly pounding its face with her fists.

Pearl arched an eyebrow. “Very well. Holo-Pearl, begin Advanced Hand-to-Hand Combat Training Module Eight.” The light construct immediately intercepted one of Connie’s undisciplined haymakers, grabbing her by the wrist and throwing her to the ground beside it. The Holo-Pearl followed up by pinning Connie and, in an almost comical manner, slapped its opponent’s face thrice. “CHALLENGER DEFEATED! DO YOU WISH TO BATTLE AGAIN?” it asked.

“I’m good,” wheezed Connie, and the light construct dutifully retreated back to Pearl’s side. Connie staggered to her feet, swaying in the breeze, and limped back to Pearl. She immediately took the offered vial of Rose’s tears, downing it in a single gulp, and sighed as it did its magic. “What… exactly was the point of that?

“As I said, to test your natural ability. You continue to amaze me, Connie. By all rights that hologram should’ve had you on the floor within half a minute. And that was extraordinarily clever, taking advantage of your enemy’s surety that they’ve defeated you to perform a counterattack - even if it only earned you more humiliation,” Pearl smiled at the girl, and Connie beamed in return. “However, natural talent can only get you so far. You have much to learn.”

Connie nodded, determination shining in her eyes. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” With a flourish, Pearl pulled a polished sabre from her gem, earning a delighted gasp from Connie. “Now, first, bow to your instructor,” The girl obliged. “Then accept your weapon hilt-first,” With grave solemnity, Connie took the blade from Pearl while she was jumping for joy inside. Pearl moved beside her pupil, placing her hands over Connie’s own. “As you’re a novice, a two handed grip is the best while you’re getting used to the weight of steel. Now, let’s start with the basics. Balance is one of the most important parts of swordplay, and the key to achieving good stability is to keep your stance wide…”

OxOxO

“…and my body lowered,” Connie whispered, facing down her opponent. The new training outfit Pearl had gotten her - a simple violet affair with a sleeveless tunic, slacks, and a red sash - was damp with sweat, and it was difficult to stay calm. The Holo-Pearl looked at her impassively, blade glimmering in the sun. The girl gulped. This was the first time that she was to spar with Holo-Pearl using actual swords, and although there was always the safety cushion of Rose’s tears if things went wrong, Connie didn’t imagine that being impaled would feel particularly pleasant.

“Begin!” cried Pearl, supervising from the patio. Although she didn’t show it, anxiety fluttered in her gem. The Holo-Pearl was on its lowest free sparring difficulty, but her pupil still stood a good chance of being hurt if she made a mistake. She had grown to like Connie. No, not only like her, but care for her as well. Then again, she always-
Pearl’s train of thought was interrupted by the clang of steel on steel. Connie had rushed the Holo-Pearl, unleashing a devastating attack before the Holo-Pearl had a chance to react. Her blade crashed into the light construct’s, sparks flying as the swords ground against each other. After a few seconds of the stalemate, Connie disengaged and resumed her assault, her blade colliding with the hologram’s in an almost perfect rhythm. The two waltzed around the backyard, probing each others’ defenses, before finally Connie began controlling the flow of battle. Slowly, steadily, she guided the Holo-Pearl to the edge of the backyard and finished it off with a graceful thrust once its back was against the wall.

Connie panted, winded from such a long battle, but grinned like a fool nonetheless.

OxOxO

“Begin!”

Connie tumbled backwards and slid to the side as the Holo-Pearl sprinted past her in a blisteringly fast charge. The light construct whirled to face her, and Connie began twirling her blade in the complicated pattern of Attack Form 8B, advancing towards her opponent. The hologram automatically adjusted, falling into step and beginning the appropriate defense form, Defense Grid 8B. Their blades almost seeming like water flowing in the air, clashing at a frenetic pace. As the form neared its end, Connie sliced to the left, her blade glimmering in the sunset, then grinned triumphantly when the Holo-Pearl countered with an outside parry. Rather than disengage and move into a different drill, Connie locked her blade against the construct’s and, before it could react, stepped forward to elbow it in the chest. It staggered backwards, and Connie finished it off with the backswing while it was stunned.

Pearl’s applause, which was almost eclipsed by the rapid beating of Connie’s heart, was music to Connie’s ears.

OxOxO

“Begin!”

The Holo-Pearl unleashed a flurry of blows on Connie, kicks, strikes, and elbows flying through the air with a dazzling rapidity. The girl countered them blow for blow, turning aside each jab and chop as she danced through the Holo-Pearl’s onslaught. Connie parried a straight punch, swiveled to avoid a sudden side kick, and followed up by feinting an uppercut before smoothly roundhouse kicking the Holo-Pearl in the chest, knocking the light construct to the dirt. Connie finished it off with a stomp to its neck.

Pearl couldn’t help but smile.

OxOxO

“Begin!”

In unison, the two Holo-Pearls dashed towards Connie, sabres lowered in perfect guard form. Connie stood completely still, heart beating steadily, sabres at her side. In the moment before the duo would be within range to strike her, Connie’s blades darted through the air, perfectly intercepting the swords of both holograms. She grinned. All that time practicing iajitsu really did pay off.

Connie drew the sabre in her left hand back, steel grinding against steel as sparks fell to the ground. While she fended off the combined efforts of the two light constructs with her right blade, Connie
swung her left in a silver arc, forcing the first Holo-Pearl back. Connie blocked the second Holo-Pearl’s overhand slash with her right sword, knocking its weapon away, then snapped a powerful front kick straight into the second Holo-Pearl’s chest. It faltered, but quickly recovered its balance and resumed its attack alongside its partner.

The girl widened her stance and stood her ground, her sabres blurs cutting through the air as she easily countered the Holo-Pearls’ web of steel. The echoes of the crashing blades created a harsh, beautiful symphony that rung through the dusk. She took a step forward, weaving her sabres in an intricate pattern. The constructs took a step back.

Connie took another step forward. Then another. She lunged, piercing a construct’s defenses and sliding her right blade through its chest. As it disintegrated, her left leg flew backwards, forcing the second Holo-Pearl that was creeping up on her exposed back to retreat. Connie spun to face her opponent, using her momentum to smash aside the Holo-Pearl’s own arc of steel and strike its forehead with the pommel of her left sabre. It froze for a moment, then dissolved.

Connie breathed hard, her forehead glistening with sweat. Pearl strode off the patio and stuffed the sabres that the holograms had wielded back into her gemstone, then gestured for Connie’s own weapons. The girl handed the swords over, then smiled wanly. “So.”

“So.”

“My dad’s contract expires tomorrow.”

Pearl paused. “...I am aware.”

Connie sighed, looking at the house. “I’m gonna miss this.”

“I will as well, Connie. These past three months have been… pleasant.”

“I mean, you said I’m good enough to start training in the Sky Arena with Steven this Saturday, but… it won’t be the same.”

“Well, just…” Pearl wiped a tear from her eye. “Remember to keep up on your physical training, alright? Don’t push yourself too hard, and stay hydrated, and, ah, make sure that your mother keeps up on the improved diet… Pearl sniffed, wiping a tear welling at the corner of her eye away. “I’m so proud of you, Connie.”

Connie suddenly leapt forward, hugging Pearl tight. The Gem awkwardly patted Connie’s back, and failed to quell the tears streaking down her face. It was silly, of course. She’d still see Connie every week at the very least. But… well, it was just like in that story Connie forced her to read, when Lisa was separated from Archmicarus and was only able to summon him every full moon. It just wouldn’t be the same.

OxOxO

In truth, Pearl had something of an ulterior motive for bringing Connie to the Sky Arena. As she helped the girl off the Warp Pad - warping for the first time was a rather unpleasant experience - she spied Steven and the blue Pearl meticulously going through the steps of Assault Form 17A. She had to repress a sigh.

Although Steven had made some progress in these past few months, he had, by and large, completely plateaued. Occasionally, he managed to flounder through one of the sparring modules, but almost every time he was soundly defeated by her holograms. Pearl attributed it to his Gem half.
As much as she hated to admit it, it had taken Pearl decades to learn how to wield the blade with any kind of proficiency. Gems were created for certain tasks, and it took immense amounts of effort to break out of the mindset of whatever job that they were made for. They were naturally rigid thinkers, most near incapable of improvisation. Diamonds led. They didn’t fight, except for her. Steven’s human brain mitigated some of these problems, but it was still clearly influenced by his mother’s gem.

After despairing over his lack of progress, Pearl recalled what had spurred her to truly put her all into her training: Crazy Lace. An arrogant quartz warrior who only sided with the rebellion due to her inexplicable friendship with Bismuth, she had constantly belittled Pearl for her inadequacy. The desire to prove the piece of coprolite wrong is what had made Pearl a true warrior.

Of course, Connie wouldn’t openly mock Steven, but she might as well spit in his face with how she had achieved such heights of skill over the months that Steven had been making no progress. A mere human, especially one Steven was so close to, outclassing him by such a massive degree would at the very least show him it was possible to improve, and hopefully spur Steven to prove to himself that he could be just as good as his friend.

Steven, for his part, was completely unaware of Connie’s accomplishments. She had elected to keep silent in favor of giving him a pleasant surprise. After all, it would’ve be mortifying for Steven to find out how Connie had first blundered through her forms, and Connie had no doubt that he would patronize her and assure her she was doing fantastic while completely outdoing her in every way possible in the perfect way he had and stars above he could be so irritating sometimes. So she had instead followed Pearl’s advice and waited until she actually had something to show off.

Connie practically jumped through the archway to the Sky Arena, gawking at the decrepit grandeur of the vast coliseum. As she and Pearl descended the stairs, Steven stopped his careful practice with his guardian and turned to greet his mentor. Upon seeing Connie garbed in a kalaripayattu uniform alongside the white Pearl, he nearly dropped his weapon. “Connie! What are you doing here? This place is dangerous!”

That stung more than Connie cared to show. “Nah, Steven, I’m fine,” she said nonchalantly. “Just here to train.”

“Huh?”

“A few months ago, Connie came to me to ask for training. I obliged. I’ve deemed her more than ready to train with you two,” the white Pearl explained.

“Bu-”

“Now!” Pearl exclaimed. “The first activity will be a direct comparison of her skills to yours and Pearl’s,” Connie reached the bottom of the stairs and began warming up, performing stretches that made Steven wince just to look at. “You two will work together to defeat Connie.”

“Doesn’t that seem a bit unfair?” Steven protested, still somewhat stunned.

Something merry twinkled in Pearl’s eye. “I suppose it is, but battle is rarely fair.”

“Don’t worry, Steven,” Connie interrupted. “I’ll try to put up a good fight. And I won’t get in the way after that, I promise.”

Gulping, Steven nodded shakily, then ran to carefully stow his khopesh in his training bag, retrieving the bokkens he kept for himself and Pearl. Likewise, Connie approached the white Pearl and bowed,
Pearl returning the gesture. The Gem then retrieved two wooden blades from her gemstone, Connie accepting them hilt-first.

“Alright. You will begin fifteen feet away from each other. If you get hit once, then you are out,” the renegade explained. “Swords don’t allow much room for error.”

Connie calmly walked to her place, keeping her blades stowed in her sash. Steven, far less sure of himself, wandered over the required distance away from Connie alongside Pearl.

“Begin!”

[Suggested BGM: https://listenonrepeat.com/?v=jmqDdXbSLjY#AvatarSoundtracks%3A_End_Credit_Music ]

Connie didn’t move a muscle. Steven trembled, looking back and forth from Pearl, to Pearl, to Connie. Sweat glistened on his brow. Then, he charged, Pearl following him.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, Connie’s bokkens were in her hands, intercepting Steven and Pearl’s swords in an instant. While Steven was still processing this information, Connie disarmed him with a flick of her wrist. Eyes wide beneath her bangs, Pearl disengaged and lunged at Connie her her bokken, but the human girl simply spun out of the way and used the momentum to slash at Steven. The vicious slice missed purely by the virtue of the boy flinching a hairsbreadth away from the blade.

Steven recovered his stance and swung his bokken at Connie in an overhand cleave. She knocked the wooden sword out of the way and responded in kind with a forceful side kick that landed directly on his gut, knocking him to the stone floor. Connie rolled beneath Pearl’s wild slash to come up next to her best friend and smash her weapon into his stomach.

Connie then immediately ducked, avoiding Pearl’s high cut, and swept her leg out in a wide arc. The blue Gem nimbly slid back, dodging the trip, but before she could recover her balance, Connie sprang upwards, the tips of both of her bokkens aimed directly at Pearl’s chest. Once more, Pearl evaded, and Connie continued her relentless attack, her twin blades seeming to cut the air itself as she pushed Pearl back. The Gem met her slash for slash, making up for her deficit in skill with raw speed.

The two danced across the arena, the subtle tide of battle ebbing and flowing between them. There was something in the child’s eyes that terrified the blue Gem, something Pearl only saw in seasoned warriors. It would be admirable, really, if Connie wasn’t slowly but surely gaining the edge in their fight. Despite knowing that the human would do no real harm if she won, Pearl couldn’t help but regret her decision to make the minimum effort required in training to keep Steven safe from Corrupted Gems. Even if she was a Pearl, she should’ve at least tried to do better for his-

While Pearl was lost in thought, Connie let loose a devastating roundhouse kick that she just barely managed to sidestep. Connie then tapped the surprised Pearl’s exposed gem with the pommel of her blade.

[End BGM.]

And like that it was over. Steven got to his feet and congratulated Connie, marveling at her skill, but her victory felt… hollow. There was no way Steven could’ve gone down that easy. He’d been training for almost twice as long as Connie, and he was the son of an intergalactic space queen with powers to match!
“Thanks, Steven, but, um, don’t go easy on me next time, okay?” Connie said.

“What are you talking about?”

Connie did her best to restrain herself. “Just… nevermind. Promise me you’ll go all out on me from here on out. I need training, not a punching bag.”

Steven flinched. “Uh… o-okay.”

OxOxO

July flew by like a blade through the air. Connie visited the Sky Arena at least twice a week, since her parents just let Pearl give her a ride to Beach City on the regular to visit. After all, she’d earned their trust by basically becoming Connie’s sole guardian for three months. But while the training was fun, it just… it didn’t mean anything. Every single time, Connie beat Steven in mere moments, and every single time she shaved a few seconds off how long it took her to defeat the blue Pearl. It was incredibly frustrating how Steven thought her self-esteem was so fragile that it needed to be supported by his patronizing lie that he “just wasn’t that good, honestly.” That was coprolite, and Connie knew it, Steven knew it, and both Pearls knew it. At some points she just wanted to rip Steven a new one, but of course he’d play all innocent and confused and make Connie feel terrible for being so mean and…

Steven, meanwhile, was slowly sinking into despair. He and Pearl had beat Connie a grand total of twice, and that was through sheer weight of numbers. Even Connie couldn’t beat him, Pearl, and four Holo-Pearls. Well, until she did, and so they moved on to five Holo-Pearls. When that stopped working, the white Pearl promised that she’d up the numbers again, but Steven knew that eventually Connie would adjust. It was pointless, really, and just underlined what Steven had learned after their first session: fundamentally, Connie would always be better than him. Every time he stepped forward in skill thanks to the pressure of fighting his best friend, Connie would leap ahead twice. She was stronger (Steven had no idea how she even lifted that zweihander), better (After Steven had given up, the white Pearl had started sparring Connie herself so that she could have someone actually challenge her skills), faster, (Steven had counted, it took an average of 3.6 seconds for Connie to take him down), and harder (Steven generally had to stop after a few hours of training, Connie kept going until sundown) than him, and there was nothing he could do to change that, no matter how hard he tried. Steven knew he should feel happy for Connie but… she seemed to resent how badly Steven was doing compared to her. Every time that Connie defeated him, she seemed to get crabbier and crabbier, snapping at him for the smallest of things. Steven was fairly certain she was starting to see him as a burden, and honestly, he couldn’t blame her.

Pearl, meanwhile, was terrified of Connie, plain and simple. Inch by inch, the human girl improved herself, and inch by inch it became more obvious that Connie could shatter her whenever she wanted. Of course, logically, she knew that Connie would never do such a thing. She was such a nice girl, if a bit short with her Diamond occasionally. But that icy fire in her eyes whenever she picked up the blade… it reminded Pearl of Blue Diamond. Of shattered Gems. Of the killing fields during the war. Pearl preferred not to think about what her counterpart had done to turn Connie into such a ruthless soldier. Besides, as a Pearl (well, a loyal Pearl at the very least), her place wasn’t on the battlefield. A mere human being able to best her was proof of that. It was only sensible for her to find a way to contribute to her Diamond’s training other than engaging directly.

And so it was, a few days before the end of July, Pearl and Steven arrived at the Sky Arena bright and early just in time to see Connie almost seem to float out of the way of Garnet’s gauntleted hand. The Gem’s fist made spiderweb cracks in the floor, and as the fusion recovered Connie unleashed her own devastating attack, her sabres like lightning. Garnet simply slapped them out of the way with
her off hand before counterattacking with a flurry of blows almost too fast to track.

As Steven watched the two spar, slack-jawed, the Pearls quietly conferred, the white one nodding along to whatever the blue one was suggesting. Garnet was slowly pushing Connie back, the girl struggling to keep up with the fusion’s speed. She would deflect a punch only to hastily dodge its follow up, then stumble back from the sudden kick that came after that. Connie hopped backwards, panting, and her guard slipped for a fraction of a second. Before Connie had fully recovered, Garnet was there, booping Connie on the nose with her index finger. “I win.”

“That… that you do,” Connie said between ragged breaths, leaning against a nearby pillar as she tried to get her wind back. She bowed deeply to Garnet, and the fusion bowed back before striding to the bleachers.

Connie walked alongside her, and almost seemed to deflate when she saw Steven. “Oh. Hey, Steven,” she said, voice flat.

“Hi, Connie!” Steven greeted, smiling entirely falsely. “Um, how’s your day going?”

“Fine.” The two stared at each other in awkward silence for a few moments, before Connie muttered something under her breath and turned to her mentor. “Ma’am, did you invite Garnet? It was a pleasant surprise getting to spar with her, but she’s never come before.”

Pearl scratched her cheek. “I… honestly don’t know why she’s here. Garnet, why did you come?”

The fusion just shrugged.

“Oookay then! I do have something different prepared for today, though. Something that should challenge you both equally.” Connie perked up. Steven slumped ever so slightly. “Pearl here,” the white Gem gestured to her blue counterpart, “found an old training datastone in her gem! We captured a few of those things during the rebellion, they were incredibly useful for training recruits who literally weren’t made for combat,” Steven stared at his shoes. Pearl chuckled, oblivious. “It’s even how I learned to project Holo-Pearls. Anyways, perhaps Pearl could demonstrate how it works?”

Pearl nodded and walked to the center of the arena. Her gem flickered, faltered, then began to shine, projecting a holographic Ruby. Clad in a formal jacket with shoulder pauldrons and numerous medals, the Ruby cleared her throat and mumbled off-projection, “This thing on?” There was a pause. “WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME!” she bellowed, body aflame, before sighing and quenching herself. “Ahem. Welcome, recruits, to the b-b-b-b-basic training program ooooooooffffffffff the Diamond Authority! Today I I I am going to d-d-demonstrate how tooooo op-operate this pro-” the projection froze. Pearl pursed her lips and tapped her gem, then gasped, doubling over in pain. Her face fell slack, becoming uncannily neutral, and she was lifted into the air by some unseen force.

“Pearl!” Steven cried, dashing towards his guardian.

“Error: Data module corrupted,” the Ruby, now unfrozen, droned. “Rebooting to last used uncorrupted program.” In an instant, emotion returned to her voice, and she beamed. “Congratulations on completing the Advanced Training Program! Now, before you are ready to be deployed, there is one last test. You will face an approximation of strength of what our foe normally fields as a skirmishing unit, appropriately sized to match your squad!”

“Come on, come on, wake up! Now’s not the time to get possessed!” The boy shook his guardian by the shoulders, and was immediately knocked back by a wave of hard light. Connie, the renegade,
and Garnet all readied their weapons.

“In order to complete this assessment, you must make your way to the commanding officer - me, in this case - and shatter them,” One by one, holographic Gems began appearing in flashes of light: A horde of Rubies that surrounded Steven on all sides, five full-sized Amethysts, and one hulking Citrine standing guard next to the Ruby officer. “Oh, and weapons are live. Can’t have subpar recruits dragging down the real fighters! So the enemies are aiming to shatter here. The assessment begins…”

[Suggested BGM: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDs375CMPww ]

Shimmering, the Ruby and the rest of the constructs turned from the standard hologram palette of light blues to an angry array of crimsons. “NOW!” And, all at once, the force began charging.

Six Rubies turned to face Steven, their eyes blank while they summoned a variety of weapons. He froze, hand resting on his khopesh’s holster as he tried to fight past fear creeping over him.

Meanwhile, Connie, Garnet, and Pearl rushed down to meet the advancing army. “If you knew that this would happen with your weird future-vision thing,” Connie yelled as she began tearing into the mass of red, blades elegantly turning aside maces, knives, and gauntlets while she felled hologram after hologram, “how come you didn’t stop Pearl!” The white Crystal Gem whirled to face Connie, eyebrow raised as she sliced a leaping Holo-Ruby out of the air, “No, not you, the other one!” Connie widened her stance and crossed her blades, intercepting four different maces all hurtling towards her ribs.

Garnet grunted and clapped her hands together, sending a bolt of electricity into the ranks of the Rubies as the Amethysts lumbered towards the trio. “There were several possibilities!” The fusion bopped a Holo-Ruby on the head with her gauntlet, poofing it. “Most of them resulted in you and Steven making amends.”

“There’s nothing to make amends for!” Connie snapped, elbowing a Holo-Ruby leaping towards her face out of the air, then spinning to block a shortsword aimed directly at her heart.

“If you say so,” Garnet neatly sidestepped a ferally growling Holo-Ruby’s wild punch. “There was a very low probability of this happening. It was a risk I was willing to-”

She was interrupted by a surprised yelp. All three heads turned to see Steven bleeding, a shallow gash torn across his shirt. The blue intermingled with a dark red.

Connie rolled her eyes. “You are really committed to this, huh? Just drop the act already! I don’t need your pity!”

Steven dodged another slash, only to fall directly into a punch that would’ve shattered bones if he was fully human. “What are you talking about?! Connie, I really need help here! This isn't a joke!”

She didn’t respond, preoccupied with the remaining Holo-Rubies in the squad she was making short work of. In unison, they rushed together, forming a massive fusion that was almost a story tall. Connie snarled. “I have bigger things to worry about than you right now! Save yourself!”

“I-” And then, at either the worst or best possible moment depending on the point of view, everything clicked. All of those months of training, all of those weeks being beaten by Connie again and again and again, it all finally coalesced when Steven needed it most and wanted it least. He raised his khopesh to block a mace, and taking full advantage of his powers, Steven sent his blood flying toward the eyes of the Holo-Rubies. As they reeled, he disengaged, scuttled to the side of another blind slash, then responded in kind. Steven’s blade shone in the morning sun as he cleaved
through two blood-stained Holo-Rubies at once.

Watching Steven awkwardly, but effectively, defend himself fanned the flames within Connie. Roaring, she evaded the Holo-Ruby fusion’s giant fist and used the opportunity to run up its arm, blades outstretched. Connie leaped, plunging both of her sabres directly into the massive Holo-Ruby’s eyes. She jumped off its rapidly disintegrating body, coming face to face with a Holo-Amethyst wielding a greataxe as soon as she landed. Connie grinned and rushed to meet her foe.

Elsewhere, Pearl had dropped to a knee and shortened her spear, bracing it against her shoulder for accuracy as she fired laser after laser at the mass of Holo-Rubies who were mindlessly flailing against Garnet’s impenetrable defense. They scrambled to form a fusion, but with a single well-aimed blow Garnet knocked them apart before they had a chance.

Pearl’s soldier-sense tingled, and she rolled to the side just before a whip would’ve sliced through her form. Sighing, she jumped to her feet and summoned a second spear, blocking another one of the Holo-Amethyst’s strikes. As its whip wrapped around her weapon, Pearl jabbed her other armament directly into its chest. It dispersed, and Pearl took a knee once more, sniping a yipping Ruby that had somehow gotten onto Garnet’s head and was uselessly beating its gauntlet against her cranium. Pearl doubted that Garnet had even noticed it.

Slowly, painfully, the four warriors, three master and one novice, fought their way to the center of the opposing army, bulldozing through the holograms until the reached the Holo-Citrine. The towering yellow hologram readied its greatsword, but before it had a chance to so much as yell a battle-cry Connie ducked under its guard and almost casually vaulted up off its bent knee to slice off its head. As the hologram dispersed, Connie landed and impaled the Holo-Ruby officer straight through its gaudily glowing gem in its chest.

[End BGM]

The blue Pearl gasped, released from the datastone, and fell to her knees. Connie tossed her sabres to her mentor and said curtly, “Take me home.”

Steven flinched. “Connie-”

The girl whirled on him, enraged. “I don’t want to hear it, Steven! I don’t! Do you really think it was making me feel better knowing that you stooped to acting like a stooge so I could beat you?”

“I was-”

Connie jabbed her finger at Steven’s face. “I feel like an idiot for ever trusting you! What am I, a charity case? The poor, lonely nerd girl with no friends that you wanted to make feel special?” She laughed harshly. “Truth is, though, I don’t need that anymore. I don’t need you. Today I proved you wrong, and don’t you dare deny it! Because I really am better than you. I don’t lie to my friends. I don’t treat them like some little kid! Just… aaagh!” Connie shook her head and stalked towards the Warp Pad. “Goodbye, Steven.”

“It isn’t-” Steven protested, but Connie cut him off.

“Just… don’t. Don’t. I’m not going to listen to your lies anymore.”

The white Pearl winced, seeing her carefully constructed plan fall to pieces. “Connie, maybe if you just give him some time to explain-”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Connie said coolly, “I don’t care. Take me home.”
“You don’t understand!” Pearl plead. “He really is that bad!” Steven somehow looked even more despondent. Her blue counterpart glared daggers at her as she applied an ineffective linen bandage to Steven’s gash. “I-I didn’t mean it like that! I”

“You can explain to me why you’re lying for him on the ride back,” Connie turned away. “Let’s go.”

Sparing a glance towards Steven and the blue Pearl, Pearl mouthed, “I’m sorry,” before leaving with Connie. And with her, Steven’s only real friend.

The blood-splattered Steven panted. “Let's never tell my dad about this. Ever.”
You and Me
Chapter by Sergeant_Plopp

Chapter Summary

The stars align, as they only do once a year.

Steven slowly came to consciousness, his thoughts immediately looming over him like a stormy cloud. If Steven had to choose two things in this world he despised above all else, it was going to sleep and waking up. He personally wasn't the biggest fan of where his mind tended to wander then. Anxieties, chilling thoughts, and his unsure future always seemed to creep up on him when he least expected it.

Unearthing himself from beneath his tomb of fluffy blankets, he couldn't help but feel as if he were cheated. Shouldn't he feel a whole lot cheerier considering it was his birthday? Then again, being thirteen just meant he was another year closer to his ultimate goal.

Plastering on a hopefully-not-too-fake smile, he ran a hand through his silky hair and pulled on both a pair of cargo shorts and a signature Mister Universe t-shirt cut with a v-neck. His nose caught a whiff of fluffy waffles from downstairs. At least his favorite breakfast was a plus. With faux reckless abandon, he slid down the ladder to the first floor bright eyed and bushy-tailed.

To his shock, he found his father cooking breakfast, not Pearl as usual. He supposed she needed a break once in awhile, especially on a day such as this. Not only was it his birthday, this was also the day Blue Diamond had died.

“Schtu-ball!” Greg cried, turning away from the waffle iron. “How does it feel to be thirteen, my favorite son?”

“Like a million bucks,” Steven said, chuckling. “Where are Lapis and Pearl?”

His father’s expression faltered for just a moment. Steven didn't miss the melancholy written on his face, causing anxiety to trickle through his chest. “They're at the supermarket picking up a few last minute things for your party.”

Steven raised an eyebrow. “A party?” That was new to him.

Greg’s eyes went wide as he snapped his fingers. He shook his head, sighing. “Oh, shoot! It was supposed to be a surprise party and I ruined it!”

“It's fine, I can still act shocked when everyone hops out to scare me. Speaking of, who all is coming? The Crystal Gems? Mmmmmaybe Marty? Whoever Andy is?”

“Of course not the last two! Marty’s dead to me… and I haven't talked to my cousin Andy in… sheesh. You're thirteen? Uh… seventeen… years.”

“Oh…” he muttered, thoroughly confused. His father didn't seem the type to actively dodge family. “Uh, then just the Crystal Gems?”

Nodding, the father turned to flip his bacon. “Yeeup. The Crystal Gem Pearl invited your friend
Connie for me, too. I offered to fly your friend Mi-sun a few weeks back for a reunion, but y’know, that's a bit unreasonable.”

“Oh.”

Greg put his fists on his hips. “What's eating ya, Steven? Ah, shoot. Wanted to see your old friend?”

“No, no, it's okay, it's been years.” Steven took a deep breath. “What's bothering me? Well... you know how I've been training with the Crystal Gems?” Greg nodded. “So has Connie. Last time I saw her, she was mad because she thought I was going easy on her. The truth is, I really just sucked eggs at sword fighting until recently. I snapped out of my funk to save myself, and to her, it basically confirmed I wasn't giving it my all in sparring.”

“Ah…” Greg sighed, nodding. “Yeah, that could be pretty pretty infuriating, being treated like you're a fragile damsel in distress.”

“What?”

“Your mother at first treated me like I was an egg. Like the slightest breeze could break me into a million pieces. It was a while before I could prove humans weren't as fragile as she thought, and I felt pretty invalidated while she did. Have talked to Connie since then?”

Steven sighed cove more, shaking his head. “Like I said, haven't seen her.”

“Well, she rsvp’d, little buddy, so maybe she realized that you really did just suck eggs,” he said complete with air quotes.

“White Pearl did say she'd explain it. Oh boy, this is gonna be so awkward,” he said and promptly slumped.

“I think it's all in your mind, Steven. You two are friends. Disagreements like this can only strengthen your friendship,” Greg took the final batch of waffles out of the iron and slid the bacon onto paper towels to soak the grease. “Now whaddya say we have a nice father son breakfast before you pretend to be surprised when Pearl and Lapis lead the surprise party entourage in here?”

“Sounds good to me. Love ya, dad.”

“I love you too, Steven.”

OxOxO

“And that's when I used my- uh- my water powers to blind two of them with some rainwater! So I used that opportunity to-”

A familiar snicker interrupted him. “Think fast.”

Steven brought his right palm upwards, manipulating his orange juice into a makeshift shield. A thin plastic rectangle, most likely a DVD case, slammed into the liquid barrier, spraying the juice all over the palanquin.

“Lapis, what the heck?!” Greg cried. Steven wiped pulp from his face. Pearl silently seethed.

“Happy birthday,” Lapis snorted. “That was a test, and you passed it. You can successfully block Zella games from hitting you.”
Steven scoffed. “Some- Wait. Did you say Zella? I've already got all of them though. Except-” he gasped aloud.

“Sigh of the World?” Lapis offered smugly. “I know. It's from me.”

Steven stood up, searching the floor for his juice-covered bounty. Sure enough, in all its glory, he found the small case to the newest installment in his favorite puzzle based action rpg. “Lapis, this is awesome, thank you!”

She merely smirked, her heart thoroughly touched. It felt relieving to even slightly return the favor he had done her.

“As fun as this was, it's not going to be that way for Pearl when she cleans it,” he said casually. She always had done that without being asked. “No more surprise attacks in the house, okay?”

Lapis’ cheeks flushed, dark with embarrassment. She clenched her fists tightly at her side. “Yeah, okay. Sorry. It was uncalled for, but you really did do a good job of not being hit.”

Pearl approached the soaked boy, a large paper bag in hand. She bowed low, presenting it to him. “This is for you, My Diamond…”

A twinge of emotional hurt rang through Steven's being. He graciously accepted it, hoping Pearl would quit degrading herself sooner. “Oh? Thanks, Pearl!”

“I spent several days crafting that for you when you were an infant.”

That thoroughly piqued his interest. It was his impression that she had gone to the store to procure a gift, but now it was seeming more and more likely it was simply for the heavy gift bag. He unfurled the top, his eyes stretching wide when he caught a glimpse of the contents. “W-”

“What is it, Steven? Something better than Zella? The suspense is killing me!” Greg exclaimed.

Steven reached inside with careful fingers, slowly pulling a navy blue mass of cloth out. Holding it out in front of him, it appeared to be a heavy hooded cloak. The woven pattern was swirling and intricate, as if it had taken years to weave, not days. It was incredibly soft to the touch.

“I- Is this what I think it is?”

“Woah,” Lapis sighed in disbelief.

She gave a swift nod. “That is indeed a cloak made from your mother’s robe. The clasp is cobalt, however. Happy birthday, My- Steven…”

“Holy wow…” Steven mumbled. “This is awesome! Does it have alien enchantments or something?”

“The material is hydrophobic. Does that count as magic?” Lapis asked slyly.

Steven raised an eyebrow, looking to Pearl. “How are we supposed to wash it if it can't get wet?”


The boy shot up, embracing both of his blue gem friends. “Thanks, you guys. This is the best birthday ever,” he said, still seconds deep into the hug.

“Here’s to another thirteen more!” Greg shouted, holding up his glass of milk. “He-”
Suddenly, violet ball tore through the curtains, slamming into Lapis. The gem caught herself, flying upright.
“Suuuuupriiiiise! What's up, squares? Celebrating your humanity like some sorta human?” Amethyst animatedly asked, getting in Steven’s face. The boy laughed, handing her a high five that was cheerily reciprocated.

“Woah, hey guys! You know I am! Or, at least I'm half celebrating. I'm half human after all, but I'm far from half excited. I'm a teenager now! I can go to pg-13 movies now, and play T for teen games! Y'know, legally!” Steven exclaimed. Amethyst always seemed to bring out genuine joy in him, similarly to Connie. She was the youngest gem after all. She curled her lips up, rolling her eyes.

“Yyyyeap, I know exactly what you're talking about!”

“Aw, it's just human stuff,” he teased, laughing with her.

Rose Quartz cleared her throat, entering in front of the white Pearl. Affixed to her warm face was an equally pleasant grin. “I hope we're not too late for the surprise festivities. Pearl mentioned you were celebrating your birth anniversary, and I adore human parties! Last time we went to one, my dress was considered shabby. Are you familiar with James Monroe?”

Other Pearl stepped forward, presenting a delicately wrapped parcel to the boy. She noticed Lapis Lazuli was eyeing her carefully. “I believe it is still customary to give gifts to people on their… birthday.”

Steven nodded eagerly, accepting it with grace. “Sure is! Come on in, guys. I think we've got enough cheesecake, considering you don't all eat.

“I hope you've got two cheesecakes, birthday boy!” Amethyst said, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“I wouldn't know. Pearl and Lapis just got back from the store. What a great surprise!”

“Yeah, your dad accidentally spoiled it, huh? Garnet predicted that,” Amethyst assured him, walking past the boy and into the kitchen. “You guys got any more steel wool?”

“Yup. Hey… where's Connie?”

Other Pearl cleared her throat, approaching the boy. “On her way, I presume. I explained your… situation in-depth while I was taking her to her home. She's been training at home, but—”

“It embarrassed her,” Steven finished.

“Aw, jeez. I'm not mad. I'd have probably been mad too if I thought someone was patronizing me.” She offered a smile. “I'm sure you'll hop right back into the swing of things once you've made up.”

“That's what I hope. Oh!” he exclaimed.

“I finished memorizing the Atari form!” “It's the Ataru,” the white pearl muttered, moving to the counter, on the opposite end relative to the blue pearl.

He blushed.

Rose Quartz smiled, taking her opportunity to speak to the boy. “So, Steven—”
“I'm sorry I'm late!” Connie exclaimed, bursting past the curtain. “My dad had to bring me, and well-you know how he is with driving.”

“Connie!” Steven loudly greeted, moving away from the others. “How ya… doing?”

She suddenly noticed the boy, her cheeks growing flush. Connie avoided eye contact. “Oh- Oh, hi Steven. I wasn’t… uh, expecting to see you here.”

“At my house?” he supplied, raising an eyebrow.

She kicked her feet aimlessly. “I thought we were meeting to set up the surprise party.”

“Greg ruined it,” Amethyst shouted from beneath the kitchen sink.

Steven cleared his threat, which had become inexplicably dry.

“Connie, there's no hard feelings.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Connie blurted, releasing a breath she didn't know she was holding and offering an envelope to him. “I'm sorry. This is for you. Happy birthday.”

“It's all-” Steven was about to accept it when a set of purple fingers snatched it away. Steven could only stare in confusion. Connie, however, spotted the culprit almost immediately. Amethyst snickered from the kitchen, walking towards them. “What's this biz?”

“Connie’s present for me. Can I see it?” Steven shrugged.

Amethyst nodded, holding it out to him. Just at the last second, she whipped it upward, outside his reach. “Too slow!” she snickered. “I think I'll give this back when you open my present.”

Steven was now thoroughly embarrassed, his shame barely hiding itself. “Aww, you got me,” he mumbled. “Now give it back.”

“Sure did. You should see the look on your face!” she chuckled, before putting on a straight face. “Okay, okay. Here you go.”

Several times, she tore it from his reach at the last second before bursting out into hearty laughter.

“Amethyst…” he grumbled when even Connie began to chuckle.

“Okay, here!” Amethyst laughed, barely containing her excitement.

Steven held out his hand, only for the envelope to disappear as soon as he closed his fingers. “Amethyst, quit fooling me!” he exclaimed frustratedly, his expression red and embarrassed. Steven whipped his arm horizontally for emphasis.

A nasty crunch resounded throughout the palanquin. Lapis snorted as soon as the source of such a sound was revealed. A large crack had splintered the top left corner of Amethyst’s gem. Steven’s, along with everyone’s eyes went wide as dinner plates. The boy observed his hand as if it were some foreign language he wasn't fluent in.

“I… probably deserved that…” Amethyst grumbled, hunching down in pain.

“N-no you didn't,” Steven mumbled, anxiety creeping throughout his body. "I,"

The boy shocked everyone once more, tearing back through the entrance of the palanquin, running
out and not looking back. Steven ran down the grassy hill, up the road, and through the Beach City woods. He continued at his frantic pace until his legs could carry him no longer. By the time he stopped, he was drenched in sticky sweat. Steven was panting loudly, his vision closing in on him. As for his heart, it was pumping wildly, so wildly that he could see the blood vessels in his eyes with every contraction.

Steven fell to the ground, still panting. He was horrified with himself. Had he really been the one responsible for Amethyst’s crack? How had he done that?!
Gradually calming down, his body returned to his resting state. He didn't know how long it took, but he was barely covered in sweat anymore. Although he wasn't in motion, his mind was running a mile a minute. Steven had never felt more horrible in his entire life, and it wasn't even a malicious action he had taken. It was only an accident, but he couldn't help but feel awful.

Certainly didn't help the situation that he felt awful before that...

He held his hand to his eyes, observing it. His palm was shaking anxiously, unable to calm itself.

“Steven!” a familiar voice cried out.
Steven made no attempt to run away as Connie neared him. He knew he needed support, but he couldn't face any gems or family. She was neither.

“Steven,” she sighed in relief, stumbling upon the clearing he rested in. She placed her hands on her knees, leaning forward. Judging from her shortness of breath, she was just as frantic in finding him as he was in getting away.

“Connie.”

“They know it was an accident, Miss Quartz healed Amethyst as I was leaving!” she told him exasperatedly. When he made no move, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “Steven? Are you alright?”

“I'm thirteen,” he said unenthusiastically, hanging his head between his hands.
On the inside, she was shocked. He appeared no more than ten! “And I'm eleven and three quarters. What about it?”

Steven said nothing, and immediately signals went off in his mind, just as they had done in the arena. He could… feel her feelings. And he could feel that Connie was irritated.
She was upset with him withholding his feelings.
Why won't you let me in?, she projected
Steven decided to go against the decision he had made on the Cloud Arena. “We should talk. I wanted to earlier, but all that stuff happened where you hated me.”

“Sorry about that…” she muttered.

“Even though you were pretty mean, you thought you had good reason. I forgive you. In fact-” sighed, shaking his head. “I- I'm sorry. We really should be more honest with each other. That way we can be certain nothing like a falling out can happen. I've been hiding a lot from you, and I don't want to do that anymore. You've been doing that too. Neither of us like that. So, Connie… I- I can ‘read’ strong emotions. I discovered it when you started training with Pearl. You're hiding so much from me, Connie. That's the same reason why you're mad at me, because I'm hiding too.”

“I- you can read my mind?” Connie asked in disbelief.
“Not entirely, but that isn't my point. Connie, we’re both at fault here, I think. We’re both upset with each other.”

The girl nodded, sitting down next to him with her arms wrapped around her knees. “Y- yeah. We should both be honest I guess. I've been keeping a lot from you, but it sounds like you're already aware of all of it. Did you know how good I was that first day when Pearl brought me to kick your butt?” she snickered.

He couldn't help but smile at how painless this was turning out. “No, I only discovered it a little bit before you left the arena. It's not thoughts, its emotions. It's kind of like an extension to my make-people-cry emotional powers,” he explained. “Anyways, I… I guess I should go first.”

“No, I'll do it,” Connie told him. “My stuff is more boring… There's a lot bothering me. At school, at home, about you.”

Steven pursed his lips. “It's not boring! With a life like mine, the experiences I hear from you are different from anything that's ever happened to me. From my perspective, it's like magic is to you.”

Connie nodded, baffled by his tendency to turn lemons into lemonade. “That makes sense,” she sighed. “I'm sure you already know I have no friends other than you.”

He nodded. “Sure do, but I just can't understand it. You're so witty, and passionate, a- and driven! It just boggles my mind! Why wouldn't anyone want to take part in that?”

“Well,” she paused. “That's because you've never been to school. You lack that perspective. I mean, you're shy too, but people like you. People just don't like me. They call me a nerd, an overachiever, and they leave me alone for fear of catching my contagious weird.”


“Right,” she mumbled, averting her gaze. “They're just very controlling, but I'm sure that's something you've gathered on your own. I know it's only because they want the best for me, but I just feel like I'm suffocating sometimes. I wish they would just let up on the rules. I feel like I'm only really able to breathe around you. That's why it was so… painful when I thought you were lying about your skill. The only ear to listen I had… fell deaf.”

“I… honestly feel the same way. About the breathing stuff,” Steven revealed, not wanting to have her go into her thoughts pertaining to him. He felt a mental sigh of relief from her. “I lie to my dad and pearl all the time. That's not new to you, but I haven't gone into it. At least I don't think I have.”

He felt confusion from her. Steven put forth all his effort to giving her emotional privacy. “What does that mean? Have you actually been lying to me?”

“Sort of. It's more like… I haven't told you. I’m not as dumb as they think I am. About my mom,” Steven mumbled, looking up at the sky. “We've talked about my doubts toward my mom before, I think. I know she wasn't a real estate agent… Ever since Lapis showed up, I can't help but feel entirely certain about my deduction. My mom did bad things- I don't know what- but she did. And Connie, I want to fix that. I don't know how, but I know when.”

“I get it now. Why you're upset it's your birthday. You want to go soon. You're running out of time,” Connie realized with hesitation in her voice.

“I'm going to try when I'm eighteen,” Steven told her. “I can't squander my powers, and not try to fix things. Otherwise, I let everyone down. It's my responsibility to make use of my birthright.”
“It means a lot that you'd tell me that. You're… actually really honest, when I reflect on it. I shouldn't have gotten so mad back then,” Connie craned her head, looking into steven’s piercing eyes. She averted her gaze, her cheeks growing warmer. “You want to know something, though? You… I don't think you need your powers to be here with me.”

Steven studied her face, coming to realize a truth within himself. “You know what? You're right. I don't,” He swallowed his fear and closed his eyes, leaning toward her. She did the same, and their lips met for a slight peck that, despite its short length, meant the world to the both of them.
Chapter Summary

Steven and Connie put their heads together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steven and Connie groaned in unison, their heads throbbing perfectly in sync as their eyes fluttered open.

“What was—” Connie asked, then furrowed her brow. Something wasn’t right. “-that?” Steven finished, his voice seeming to come from inside Connie. But it wasn’t his voice, precisely. A different intonation, a slightly higher pitch, but still familiar.

Connie stumbled to her feet, her body feeling more gangly than it usually did - which was saying something, since puberty always made things a hundred times more awkward. Steven shook his head. Wait, how did he know that? His brain felt fuzzy, like she was on the edge of disappearing into something bigger, something bigger than them.

But they were the something bigger, they realized, some of the fog lifting from their mind. With dawning comprehension, they felt around their sternum, fumbling around with these new, strange proportions of theirs. Their hand finally found cold, hard crystal.

They stood dumbstruck for a moment, then began frantically feeling around their new body. Then they realized what they were doing, blushed, and instead peered at their reflection in a nearby stream. Long hair, longer than, well, taking things into account, it did make some amount of sense considering their, no, his real form, wait, what real form? What were they talking about? Connie really, really needed to talk to Steven about this, but, oh stars, that paralyzing fear and-

It felt like an icicle had lodged in their skull, driving cold, painful tendrils through their brain. For a moment, everything was clear, and there was Steven and Connie again, thoughts in separate parts of their mind. But something snapped, bringing the two into a confused amalgamation once more. Their, his, no, their gem burned with cold fire.

They took a deep breath, calming themself. Didn’t want that to happen again, whatever that was. Taking another look in the stream, the rational minds of both of their components took the forefront and began cataloging their features while all the other parts continued panicking in the background. Light tan. Smooth, dark hair, flowing past their waist. Jean shorts. A loose red tank top over a star tee that was far too small. They briefly wondered what had happened to the rest of Connie’s red dress, but tabled that topic for another, less bewildering hour. Next to them were two pairs of shoes, neatly placed next to each other, and a sun hat. They snickered at the delicate placement of the clothing, and sighed. This was kind of nice, really. Peaceful. They could feel Connie and Steven within themself, still independent beings but part of... them, they supposed. As close as they could possibly be. It was electrifying. Now that the panic had subsided, they could jump for joy.

There was still a few problems. A name, for one. They perused Connie’s vocabulary for a good one, delving into some of the more esoteric options once it became apparent that the common ones held
no appeal. Maybe... ah, that was a good one. Rhapsody. It felt right.
Rhapsody got to their feet and stretched, their head hitting a wooden bough above where Steven and
Connie were... were... their cheeks reddened. “Did we really... yeah, yeah. We did. It was weird,
but... exciting too, right? Right. I’m sorry, I should’ve- no, no. It’s fine. Really? It is!” Their eyes
widened. “Wait, wait am I going to tell parents?” Rhapsody’s hand flew to their gemstone, and
gasped, repeating with more urgency. “What am I going to tell her parents?”

They began pacing, rubbing circles in their palm with their thumb as their mind raced. “Okay. So,
what exactly did I- yeah, I remember. Or do they, no, I remember? Connie remembers. I think?”
Rhapsody groaned, tugging at their silky hair. “It’s so hard to think like this! Fission on three?” They
nodded, bracing themself. “Let’s do this. Just think of, um... being separate people, I guess? Okay.
Okay.”

One. Rhapsody furrowed their brow, trying to sort the jumbled mess that was their mind and
memories into Steven, Connie, and Rhapsody-shaped piles.

Two: They inhaled, then exhaled, trying in vain to relax their tensed muscles.

Three! Rhapsody closed their eyes, ready to go back to where Fusions went when they unfused...
and didn’t.

“Steven? Connie?” There was no answer.

“Hello?” Rhapsody somehow felt Steven waving awkwardly, or at least the parts of him that weren’t
them right now.

However, Connie was nowhere to be seen. Rhapsody frowned, then began poking around where
Connie’s memories should’ve been, only to start drowning in a torrent of anxiety. They reeled, static
scything through their mind. “This doesn’t make sense;” Rhapsody muttered, clutching their
forehead. “If we’re so badly in disharmony, then shouldn’t I be unfusing right now?” Icy spikes
emanating from their gem was their only answer.

“Maybe...” Blue and red danced across their vision. “Yeah, she should... yeah!” They glanced
towards the sun, wincing at both its rays invading their eyes and its position in the sky. The
Maheswarans would be coming to pick Connie up in just a few hours. They had to make tracks.
Rhapsody pushed aside the searing pain of their migraine and sprinted away, leaving a trail of dust
behind them.

OxOxO

They avoided the Palanquin. Neither of Rhapsody’s components objected to their decision, the mere
thought of having to explain this to so many people at once frightening one part into paralysis while
the other just filed Rhapsody as another secret to be kept.

When Rhapsody tried to stop at the Temple cave, they fell flat on their face, an unfortunate side
effect of reaching speeds of around forty miles per hour on foot. At least they had made good time.
Rhapsody let out a groan, muffled by the sand, then rolled over. Garnet was standing over them,
extending a hand. “G-Garnet? Thanks,” they murmured, and got to their feet with the other Fusion’s
help. Wordlessly, Garnet led Rhapsody over to the Warp Pad. Without any apparent signal from
Garnet, the ancient device flared to life and shot the two Fusions into a crystalline column hurtling
towards an unknown destination.

They landed on a vivid yellow cloud, a Warp Pad embedded in its center. Rhapsody barely had time
to gasp in wonder before Garnet was off again, leaping from curiously colored cloud to the next. It
was almost trivial for Rhapsody to keep up. After a few minutes, they arrived at their destination: a miniature version of the Sky Arena. Rhapsody winced at the sudden influx of emotionally charged memories from their components.

Garnet sat and folded her legs at the center of the small arena, gesturing for Rhapsody to join her. They obliged, awkwardly shifting their weight to find a comfortable position on the hard, scuffed floor.

“I figured you would want some privacy,” Garnet explained.

Rhapsody’s throat tightened, guilt clashing with fear in their hammering heart. Fear won out. “I-Thank you. Again.”

Garnet shrugged. “It’s no problem.” The Fusion then let her facade drop, revealing a wide grin that looked almost uncanny on the normally stoic Gem. “You’re amazing.”

They flinched, taken aback. “Wh-what?”

“You are impossible by nature. Never in the vast history of Earth has a Gem and a human fused. You are unique, an experience that is entirely new. I never thought I would find someone like you. It’s incredible. Not even my future vision could predict you!”

Rhapsody cast their gaze downward. “Well… How did you know I’d be at the Temple?”

“You don’t miss a thing,” Garnet remarked. “My foresight informed me something really exciting would happen there. It was right.”

“Oh.”

Garnet took off her glasses, smile fading. “Now listen to me. You need to hear this. Because of who and what you are, it is up to you and no one else to decide what kind of person you are going to become. Not your mother or fathers,” Rhapsody’s heart fluttered at the mention of Connie’s parents, “not any of the Gems, not even me. Never forget that.” Garnet closed her eyes for a few seconds, her face blank. She was fighting every reflex to smile.

Rhapsody was awestruck. “Um… ah…” They shook their head violently. “Get it together! Well, um, that was certainly a… speech. I’m going to have to process, or, um, we? I feel like that’s definitely a group discussion. If there is even a group. Which there probably is, because, um, I’m… I’m where Connie and Steven intersect, right? There’s Connie, and there’s Steven, and then there’s me made out of them that’s something entirely new. Being a Fusion is confusing. Heh. But back to the matter at hand, well, the thing you brought up at any rate, yeah. I, we, or, um, Connie, does have a problem. Her parents are coming to Beach City in a few hours, and we, um, can’t unfuse.”

“Really?” Garnet frowned, adjusting her shades. Memories of a particularly troublesome purple fusion danced within her mind. “This probably won't sound very good, but I can't tell you what the problem is.”

Agony crawled across Rhapsody’s skull as Connie flailed in panic. “WHAT? You're not sure?! You're a fusion expert!” they screeched. The part of them that was primarily Connie began raving. “Oh, stars, what about school? Book club is in a day! Where am I going to stay, will my, or, er, no, this is definitely me talking here, will my parents even accept me? They don’t even know about magic yet, and who knows what the abacus value is for fusing with my b-b-b-b-b-”

Garnet placed a hand on Rhapsody’s shoulder. “Connie. Steven. Trust me. You’ve got a lot of work to do. I may not be able to diagnose this issue, but I can try my best to cure it. It will take time,
patience, and perseverance for everything to be right in the end. But, in order for everything to work out, you should probably tell Greg and the rest of the Gems about this.”

Rhapsody gulped. That was going to be a fun conversation.

OxOxO

“Breathe,” Rhapsody started hyperventilating. Garnet repressed a sigh. “No, not like that. Five seconds in, five seconds out. Remember that even if I wasn't here, you wouldn't be alone.”

“Right,” they sighed. “It's just impossible to stop worrying about how everyone will react.” In fact, such anxiety had almost entirely erased thoughts of homework, clubs, or other activities to be missed.

“Understandable, but I assure you that no matter how this initial reveal goes, it will all work out in the end, Rhapsody.”

“I've got no doubt in your future vision, but I really don't want to do this.”

Garnet shot them a stern look. “You should.”

Rhapsody responded with their own. “Didn't you say I shouldn't listen you? Only me?”

“I suppose I did, but you should heed my advice concerning this. Go up the hill and into the palanquin. Connie's parents are still not here, so at least there's that. I'll be right behind you. You have my word, and I promise that's not something easily broken,” she winked at her fellow fusion.

As they mentally prepared themselves, they couldn't help the trickle of anxiety centered around their gem. Deciding that they'd never be fully prepared, they began their journey up the dirt road to Steven's residence. It was a slow one, despite the added length to their legs. Rhapsody purposefully slowed down so as to avoid confrontation the longest.

It was incredibly nerve wracking to hear the hustle and bustle of the ongoing party about to be crashed. Then they remembered all the fuss was most likely centered around Steven's accident and subsequent flight.

Rhapsody swallowed their fear and burst into the palanquin without warning. It went far from their expectations, as they had to fumble around with the heavy curtains serving as a door. “Hello there,” they said.

The awkward silence was broken by the sound of a pitcher full of lemonade shattering on the crystalline floor. Blue Pearl, who had dropped it, made several exclamations of shock and fear. “Pi-”

Amethyst, the bravest of the group of gobsmacked gems and Greg, approached the fusion. She stopped just in front of them, looking up at the mountainous Rhapsody. “Connie? Steven? Steeeee... vonnie?”

"Actually, the name I've chosen for myself is Blue Ultimate Lifeform Alaska Titan Rhapsody Uniwaran.” The group stayed silent, which Rhapsody didn't appreciate. The fusion laughed awkwardly, avoiding eye contact. “Just kidding! It's just Rhapsody for now,” Their facade dropped. “Is the silent treatment in style or something?”

“YOU'LL have to excuse us. We've all... witnessed a fusion between a Diamond and a human,” Rose said.

Rhapsody pursed their lips. “Right. Well, you'd better get used to it quickly. Garnet thinks I'm stuck
“Let’s get the Q and A over with now. The sooner we’re on the same page, the sooner we can have even a modicum of normalcy.”

Amethyst snickered. “So is it like a Swiss army-”

Rhapsody went beet red, showing off a scowl that would give even Ruby a run for her money.


“Who made you the flippin’ fusion police? I was just trying to lighten the clearly not light mood!” the Quartz objected.

“Yeah, I'm just going to go live in the ocean until this all blows over,” Rhapsody declared, turning about on their heels.

They felt a palm brush their left hand as they were darting away. Rhapsody leapt into the air, soaring toward the forest they originated from. This time, however, they were careful to land high on a tree’s limb, far from where Garnet had discovered them. Once they were certain they were “alone”, they held a hand to their gemstone.

“So I guess we’re No Home Boys now?” The more Steven part of them asked.

A voice from below interrupted their response to themselves. “I don't know what that is, but it sounds wonderful.”

Rhapsody’s eyes went wide, their heart beating wildly. They were dumbstruck. How had they been found so quickly? “Rose?” they asked, poking their head over the thick branch.

“Yes.”

“How-”

“That's not important. You are important, Rhapsody.”

They scoffed. “You sure I'm not a zoo animal? You all seemed pretty keen on watching me from afar!”

Rose gave them the best apologetic look she could. “You've got to understand how… truly unique you are, even among fusions. You're a fusion of three-fourths human and one-fourth Diamond. None of us have even a remote idea on how to react!”

“Oh yeah? You've all been dealing with a half-human half-Diamond for long enough, so it seems to me that you should!” Rhapsody shouted down to her.

“Your logic is sound, but this is… different.”

“I'm going to have to start writing down how many times you say that!”

That caused Rose to chuckle under her breath. Rhapsody was about to deliver another fresh helping of piping-hot snark when they were stopped. “I'm sorry for laughing, but I couldn't help myself. This entire situation is just so… funny.”
They pursed their lips, narrowing their eyes. “How so? Explain.”

“Garnet is the one who found you,” Rose said excitedly. “Has she ever told you about the first time she fused to become herself?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Well, I won’t go into specifics, but it was in front of you! Now years later, the first fusion of the Blue Diamond gemstone is in front of Garnet,” Rose explained.

“Then what happened?” Rhapsody asked after a pause, their interest fully piqued. It seemed to them impossible for such a first encounter to go well. Pearl’s initial disgust with Garnet solidified that to them.

“Well, that’s a story for her to tell.”

“If you have no story, we’ve no more reason to talk. So, bye bye,” they waved. “I’m staying in this tree until the sun itself dies in a fiery explosion.”

“I was afraid you’d say that… A fusion like you shouldn't be alone during your early stages. It's understandable you wouldn’t want to be near people you aren't too close to, so I'll have the rest of the Crystal Gems withdraw. Just please go back to Greg. You need to be around people at least one of your components trust unconditionally right now.”

“I-” the fusion considered her words. She was no fusion, but Rose Quartz had to know what she was talking about to lead over Garnet. Rhapsody grumbled, falling out of the tree and landing on all fours in an inhuman manner. “You win this round, Rose Quartz. Go on ahead and send everyone home.”

OxOxO

Rhapsody spent about ten minutes pacing back in forth at the bottom of the brooding hill. They were keen to stay there forever, but the Crystal Gems left and leapt toward their temple sanctuary. It was time to make their reappearance, they supposed, crossing their arms. As slowly as they could with their towering legs, they arrived at the palanquin.

It was abundantly clear that no one was fully prepared when they entered. Greg sat at the kitchen table, staring with concern at half of his child. Lapis sat on the counter, hunched forward with confusion etched into her face. Pearl was most pitiable of all. She ran a mop back and forth over an obviously clean surface for a full thirty seconds before Rhapsody cut the silence.

“Hey, guys. Sorry for bailing earlier.”

Pearl choked back a sob as she snapped her gaze on Rhapsody. “Please forgive me…”

The fused young adults were baffled. “Huh? For what?”

She sank to her knees. “You look so much like her… I should have put a stop to your rel-”

“Shut your mouth, Pearl,” Lapis interjected venomously. “Freaking out isn't gonna help in any way.”

Pearl hung her head low. Her shame marginally outweighed the building urge to punch Lazuli in the face. “Maybe it will…”

Greg stood up and sighed. “I don’t think it will. I’ve… got an idea. Rhapsody, tell us what you want
us to do.”

Rhapsody took no pauses before unloading her answers. “I just don't want this to be awkward anymore! Treat me like I'm Steven if you have to. I'm sure the Maheswarans will treat me like I'm Connie no matter what I say.”

The man who resembled a bearded hot dog gulped. “Wuh oh. This will be the second most unexplainable thing I’ll have to explain to someone’s parents.”

“At least we have time to prepare…” the fusion supposed.

As much as Lapis wanted to come out and scream about how bizarre this was, a deep part of her urged her to just go along with it. Even before the war, she had been open-minded, but this was quite a strainer on that. “If you say so,” she said, clenching her blue fists.

“Is there anything you need, My Diamond?” Pearl said, freezing toward the end of that sentence. However, she made no attempt to correct such a mistake, as there was no Steven to correct her. Only Blue Dia- Rhapsody.

“Unless you've got a fission technique, I think I'm all set…”

OxOxO

Peridot was undeniably, irrefutably, and utterly perplexed. “What in the..?” she muttered, raising a brow.

Either the unreliable robonoids had arrived at the wrong clodding location, or the display screen must have been malfunctioning. By all accounts, the Galaxy Warp should have been right in front of her vision spheres. But no, all that sat in her view was an inky blue ocean, just like the majority of this condemned planet!

Peridot double checked the coordinates, then triple checked, then quadruple checked as was the standard.

Just several months ago she had located the place with her satellite surveyors, and confirmed the coordinates down to the decimal. Sure, the Warp was crumbling, but it was nowhere near decrepit enough to sink into the ocean in such a short time. That alone was reason enough to suspect other forces at work, but the question what what?

What on Earth could destroy and swallow up solid gem stone? Not anything, according to the reports.

Peridot grumbled under her breath as she gave the robonoids their self destruct command.

“Another approach is required…”

Chapter End Notes

Wooooooohh, I bet a lot of you saw this coming. Did you? Did you not? Come tell us at our discord, kmNpaaH!

On another note, this is the final chapter TheDoomKitten worked on. Let's send her
some love in return for this awesome send-off!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!